

# Alderman Shares Thoughts on Teaching as Place-Creating

Following are excerpts from remarks made by Board of Governors 2009 Teaching Award Winner Derek Alderman (Geography) at the annual faculty convocation.

I am amazed more and more every year by the capacity of my students to inspire me, challenge me, question me, and frustrate me. Yes, that's what I said—frustrate! In a recent student opinion of instruction survey, one student wrote about me: "He assigns too much reading, writing, and thinking." Other student comments over the years have included: "He needs a haircut," "He needs to lose weight," "He thinks he is funny and entertaining, but he really isn't," "He needs a better accent, maybe a British one." Although I would not give up being a professor for anything, teaching requires having a tough skin. Students expect a lot from us, sometimes more than we can deliver.

Teaching is hard work and not all of the work of teaching happens in the classroom. Allow me to illustrate with a humorous story. Before coming to ECU, I taught at a small liberal arts college in Georgia. One year, the president of the college announced that all faculty members were required to help move students into the dorms over the weekend as part of our student-centered mission.

I remember one male student in particular. I carried a refrigerator, microwave, big screen TV, and stereo up four flights of stairs for him. His father tipped me \$10. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, although I did make 30 more dollars that day.

While I am not ready to go back to working for tips, I have spent the past several months thinking about the economic downturn. Like many of you, I am worried about the budget crisis. It is easy to become demoralized and feel that our efforts are undervalued. But I would encourage you to maintain your high commitment to teaching. Don't lose sight of the important positive impact you have on student lives, both while they are at ECU and after they graduate. If your experiences were like mine, you became a professor because of the great teachers you had in college. These teachers saw our education not just as a requirement of the job or a service to be provided but part of their passion for the field.

I am a big believer in that word passion. Passion is what drives us to do the right thing with students and go the extra mile when no immediate payoff is evident. Your passion for learning can be infectious and can become your student's passion for learning. Creating or maintaining a faculty passion for teaching requires looking at the university as a site of empowerment.

The purpose of the university is not simply to transfer or "sell" knowledge to students. Its larger purpose is to design experiences and environments that help students have a role in constructing their own knowledge. Students learn best when they are allowed to explore subjects from multiple perspectives and dimensions.

As a geographer, I study and teach



East Carolina University professor Derek Alderman spoke at the annual Faculty Convocation Aug. 24, sharing his thoughts about teaching as creating place. (Photo by Cliff Hollis)

about the role of space, place, and landscape in everyday life. For me, teaching is about constructing dynamic and critical places of learning, where students can be active participants in their own education and not mere consumers of information.

I would like to discuss the sort of places of learning that I try to create here at ECU.

## *A Place of Dialogue*

We can think about place on many levels. On the one hand, the word prompts us to think about the physical location and material qualities of learning. Creating an effective place of learning may involve making the classroom more engaging. In my own teaching, I often try to transform the classroom into a "place of dialogue," where we learn by talking and listening to each other in respectful ways. This learning through dialogue does not have to be confined to classroom discussions.

## *A Place of Empathy*

For instance, I sometimes ask students to meet and interview an international student on campus as a way of gaining insight into another cultural group. Through such dialogue, it is also possible to make the classroom into a "place of empathy," where students begin to identify with another person's situation, feelings, and challenges.

The interview assignment also provides me the opportunity to talk with students about the ethics, politics, and mechanics of the research process.

## *A Place of Research*

I firmly believe, along with many of you, that good teaching and research

occur in the same place. Transforming our classrooms into a "place of research" is certainly challenging, but the return can be significant in motivating students and helping them develop their own scholarly interests.

I believe that almost any student—undergraduate or graduate, high performing or low performing—can carry out some form of critical investigation if matched with a project that meshes with their interests and strengths.

## *A Place of Co-learning*

Once students become scholars, they not only contribute to the construction of their own knowledge but also our knowledge as faculty. In this respect, the classroom can become a "place of co-learning," where the teacher becomes student and the student becomes teacher. While important things can and should happen in our classrooms, it is sometimes necessary to move beyond the classroom to create a place of learning. One of my favorite places to take students is the old Cherry Hill Cemetery near 1st Street. We photograph, map, and analyze the cemetery landscape for evidence of demographic patterns, social attitudes, local history, environmental processes, and preservation concerns. For many students, the Cherry Hill exercise transforms a spooky cemetery into a "place of experience," where they learn by applying abstract ideas to a real world setting. Because I ask students to work as teams, the cemetery also becomes a "place of collaboration," where they realize that learning does not happen in a social vacuum, but by interacting with others.

## *A Place for Scholarly Participation*

The collaboration that happens at

Cherry Hill is a useful reminder that place refers to more than physical location. Place is also defined by social relations and it is important to use our teaching to situate students within larger academic and lay communities. In my department, for instance, we place great emphasis on helping students attend professional conferences. In fact, in the past 6 years, over 100 geography students have attended regional and national meetings. Creating a "place for scholarly participation" connects the student to a social network that not only advances their learning but also their professional development.

## *A Place for Engaging*

Also important to development of students is making them aware of the needs and issues of the surrounding region—something of great importance here at ECU. Creating a "place for engaging" these issues within our teaching has the promise of enhancing student leadership and activism. While the word engagement is new for some of us, it refers to something many of you have been doing for a long time—partnering your students with community groups in mutually beneficial ways.

In my case, these partnerships have ranged from taking a tourism class to the Grifton Shad Festival to survey visitors to working with a student to produce research materials for the Martin Luther King Historic site in Atlanta. Engaged learning, as I have found, can happen across a host of scales and scenarios.

Community and professional engagement can result in tangible and measurable benefits. But the role of place in teaching goes much deeper. Place is also a structure of feeling we cultivate among students. Everyday, we have an opportunity through our teaching to help students fashion a "sense of place," a sense of attachment, identity, and perspective.

As the noted geographer Doreen Massey has argued, this sense of place needs to be progressive rather than provincial. It needs to be inclusive rather than exclusive, outward looking rather than inward looking. With a progressive sense of place, students see connections rather than borders. These connections can be social, economic, or environmental in nature. A sense of place informs opinions about immigration as well as global climate change. A progressive sense of place situates our students in a larger world and assists them in making moral and ethical judgments about themselves and others. A sense of responsibility invariably accompanies such a sense of place.

I have tried to explain my approach to teaching using a concept familiar to me—place. Regardless of the words we use, all of us recognize that good teaching takes passion, particularly in these lean economic times, and an intense commitment to students, even when they frustrate us. I know that great things will happen inside and outside the classroom this year and you will be responsible for much of it.