

## **Award for Excellence in Teaching Geography**

### **Dr Susan E. Wurtele**

At Trent University, where Dr. Susan Wurtele is an Associate Professor of Geography, she teaches a range of courses including human geography and upper year courses on urban environments and feminist geographies. In addition to undergraduate teaching she is an active member of the Frost Centre for Canadian Studies and Indigenous Studies where she is involved with students at both the Master's and Ph.D. level.

Teaching is a calling for Susan, and she is consistently in search of new ways of making learning meaningful to the variety of students who come through her door. She is committed to student-centered and inclusive learning. Her classrooms are places which are challenging, open and friendly, and where multiple pedagogical strategies are used to facilitate the learning of all of the students in both lecture and tutorial settings. She draws on the principles of adult education which sees students as partners in the learning process who are capable of taking responsibility for their own learning. At the same time, she believes that it is her responsibility to provide a learning environment that is accessible to all—this means a learning environment that is flexible and multi-faceted.

As an early adopter of the principles of Universal Instructional Design, Susan has been able to effectively encompass all types of learning, which allows the individual to learn and excel in a manner which suits them. She also uses a variety of content delivery modes such as group activities, dynamic (and typically humorous) lectures, films, field trips, and work in the geography lab and assessment options such as mind maps, reflection papers, reading summaries, film reviews and formal letters to acknowledge the different ways students take in information and express themselves. Through these efforts, Susan has demonstrated a dedication to excellence in both her own teaching and in her students' learning because she motivates them to learn and is continually changing and adapting her instructional environment to ensure that every student can get the maximum out of the time in her course.

Another of Susan's great strengths stems from her own commitment, as a cultural geographer, and as an active citizen, to the concept of community. She shares this with her students at every opportunity, grounding broader ideas with local examples, and leading students in tours of downtown Peterborough to make particular points about the urban environment and to encourage their engagement with the wider Peterborough community. Not surprisingly, she has been a leader in community-based education initiatives. Supervising community-based education projects is challenging work as students need careful support and guidance through what are usually unfamiliar research processes. The high quality, innovative work produced by many of her students speaks to Susan's supervisory skills as well as to the talents and motivation of the students themselves and the strength of the Trent Centre for Community-Based Education. The Active and Safe Routes to School project, undertaken by Susan's students for the Peterborough City County Health Unit, is an especially good example of engaged community learning and participation, as the recommendations from the students' research have been incorporated into the current municipal transportation plan. This kind of hands-on learning in the service of community development goes a long way in bridging divides between universities and communities, and students are both excited and honoured to see that their research can have a practical impact in the community. The results of this project were published in *Children, Youth and Environments* 15(2), 2005.

Susan's interest in creating a compelling and rounded learning environment for undergraduate students does not end with her individual courses: by setting a benchmark for her faculty colleagues, inspiring and shaping the goals and practices of future teachers, and providing leadership in the area of pedagogical workshops for graduate teaching assistants, Susan's instructional impact is far reaching.