

## Award for Excellence in the Teaching of Geography

### Dr Catherine Nolin

Over the past decade, since Dr. Catherine Nolin joined UNBC's Geography Program, she has distinguished herself as a truly exemplary teacher. She has been recognized as such at UNBC and regionally, receiving the UNBC Teaching Excellence Award in 2007, and the J. Alistair McVey Award for Teaching Excellence of the Western Division of the Canadian Association of Geographers in 2009. We feel she deserves national recognition of her skill and commitment to teaching Geography.



Dr. Nolin has taught Geography at all levels, including an introductory course in Human Geography (100-level), a highly popular Social Geography course (200-level), courses on the Geography of International Development and the Geography of Migration and Settlement (300-level), and the Geographies of Culture, Rights and Power (400-level + graduate). She frequently delivers UNBC's Natural Resources and Environmental Studies (NRES) Qualitative Methods graduate course module - a requisite for all NRES masters students across social and physical disciplines. She also teaches an Advanced Qualitative Research Methods (graduate level), required for many of UNBC's MA Interdisciplinary students.



At the undergraduate level, Dr. Nolin inspires students to critically think, and to act on their knowledge. A rigorous tutorial in her second-year Social Geography course offers students early in their academic career small-section discussions of the material and consideration of its application to life situations. Rather than leaving the instruction of the tutorials to TA's, she alternates with her TAs, so that all students enjoy her leadership. She also puts significant time into preparing her TAs. The quality of this early experience results in students in these courses considering a major or at least a minor in Geography.

Dr. Nolin is perhaps best known for her Guatemalan field course, on Geographies of Culture, Rights and Power, where she pursues a highly experiential-based and strongly activist curriculum. Students meet with human rights lawyers, indigenous groups who have experienced genocide, indigenous villagers struggling with the effects of mining on their traditional territories, mining corporation officials, and Canadian embassy personnel. They observe, engage in conversations with these groups, discuss their observations and experiences with each other in daily debriefing sessions and learn to keep journals of their findings and emotions. They frequently become involved in helping villagers out with a project at hand during the course (e.g. helping out with clean-up after a mudslide). The experience is frequently traumatic, given the nature of what the students see and hear. Upon returning, the students prepare a presentation that is open to the public, and has grown to be a popular event in Prince George. Catherine coaches the students in preparation for the meetings in Guatemala, provides continued emotional support during the trip and after, and mentors the team in preparing a polished, professional presentation to the public upon return. Numerous students have indicated this course has been an absolutely life-changing experience.

At the graduate level, Dr. Nolin also provides outstanding teaching and mentorship. Her Advanced Qualitative Research Methods course has become highly popular both among supervisors of graduate students (many of us require all our graduate students to enroll) and among students themselves. Indeed, Dr. Fondahl has experienced several graduate students who were not terribly excited about the prospect of the course coming by 4-6 weeks into the course and noting their gratitude for being required to take it – and later noting that it was the best course of their graduate career. One (male) graduate noted with some surprise “I discovered from her that I am indeed a feminist – who would have guessed!” The course prepares the students to approach their data collection and analysis confidently and critically, and methodologically excellent theses from those having taken this course are the norm. On former student of the course writes:

Dr. Catherine Nolin is an exceptional teacher who embodies the best of the craft: a generous spirit, an incredibly strong work ethic, and a remarkable ability to bring out the best in her students. Whether from class discussions or copious comments on submitted work, one cannot help but recognize that teaching for Dr. Nolin is a passion and a gift. Students who take her courses work very hard but are rewarded when effort is reciprocated in a thoughtful and empowering way. To say Dr. Nolin inspires and enables her students is to understate her impact. She has a remarkable ability to make students want to work harder: a contagious belief in what we as scholars can achieve. I am a much better scholar for taking a course with Dr. Nolin and I often recommend her courses to students who are prepared to work hard. I am a PhD student now, in part thanks to Dr. Nolin, and I aspire to someday be a teacher as thoughtful, hardworking, and effective as she.

Dr. Nolin also regularly co-publishes with her graduate students (e.g. see CV - publications with Einbinder, LaPlante, Reade, Stephens), offering superb mentorship in this respect as well. She works with them on both academic articles and articles for the popular press, coaching them in how to mobilize their research findings to reach a wider audience as part of her activist-scholar commitment.

Teaching continues outside the classroom, coursework, and supervision of graduate students. Dr. Nolin has founded a Guatemala Research Group at UNBC, to encourage undergraduate and graduate students to connect with faculty, adjunct faculty members and others to continue discussions, action-based research and advocacy between Guatemala Field Schools.

Dr. Nolin is innovative in her teaching, highly committed to her students, and devoted to enthusing them about scholarship with a purpose to better the world in which we live.