

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

### **Dr Michael F. Fox**

Mike Fox has, until his recent retirement, been a teacher for more than 39 years. Some 36 of these years were spent at Carleton in a department where until recently the faculty all knew one another and their students, and where devotion to students was part of the departmental ethos. Among the many teachers who conducted themselves with enthusiasm for the "task eternal" (Carleton's motto) Mike Fox stands out. This is not because he has been good at his job, and he has, but because he believes he has been privileged to be able to contribute to the needs of students.

He has taught courses variously described as "introductory", "statistical ", "aerial photography" and substantive course in "agricultural geography". That the subject matter of introductory and agricultural geography might appeal to a large number of students is perhaps understandable, but few students elect to take statistics and only do so because it is a requirement of the program. Yet Mike, as in all his courses, obtained scores that exceed departmental, faculty and university means, and amazingly these scores held from first year through the graduate years. Most university lecturers rejoice in their achievement as students come to realize the truly formidable talent that is in front of them; unlike most, this is clear about Mike Fox from first exposure! How is this enviable record achieved?

One answer is that Mike has long employed new technical and pedagogic insights to advance the cause of learning, including in his most recent phase, the incorporation of sound and visualization techniques into web-based courses. A second is that he has actively researched how these materials are received and has published his results in the appropriate learned journals to assist others. As a result of his class room experience and his research activity he was asked and agreed to serve as associate dean for many years so that appropriate guidance might be given and meaningful policies relating to teaching implemented. Yet one suspects that this was not the most compelling reason for his appointment to this position nor the fact that his classes have been so well attended. Rather, it is because of a reputation as a caring individual who is always available inside or outside the class room, one who is always willing to serve, and to do so with a tremendous sense of humour. Again as educators we have all known professors, thankfully few, who though they have little substantively to impart do so with humour and enjoy student support. This is not the case here because though Mike actively employs laughter he also approaches his work both with substantive insight and contemporary knowledge but also with a philosophy of education.

Fox believes (1) that teaching per se is but one aspect of a larger learning process (2) that while learning takes place in a variety of ways " through visual, auditory and practical ("tactile") means, the "normal " form of delivery has been auditory, and he seeks to broaden this, matching the predisposition of particular individuals to specific learning approaches while recognizing that the difficulty of this increases with class size (3) that his job includes not only imparting substantive and conceptual material but a love and appreciation of the subject matter and (4) a capacity and desire to solve problems through the development of capacity to reason and the adoption of appropriate skills (5) that whatever the success a student ultimately achieves, by whatever route, each must be accorded respect and dignity though the expression of that need not always be identical. This wins the respect of students and hundreds of letters from his students have drawn out these points though in a variety of expressions and some more articulate than others. One of the better letters noted that "Good teachers share knowledge in order to awaken the mind, not to prove theirs is superior" (Kawika). Surely that is the ultimate compliment for a life spent in the service of others.