

ALEXA ROGGEVEEN

Dr. Alexa Roggeveen, Program Coordinator of the Social Service Worker - Gerontology Program, is inspired by her students and is dedicated to shaping meaningful learning experiences. "I have tremendous respect for the job that my students do as social service workers," Roggeveen said, "I don't know that I could do exactly what they plan on doing. I can teach them aspects of being a practitioner but I don't know if I could have that role myself. It's a very hard job and I learn a lot from them as well." She is humble about her teaching success that has awarded her recognition as one of Sheridan's internal 3M Teaching Fellowship Nominees. Roggeveen's respect for her students as future professionals in the field of gerontology motivates her to keep her classroom adaptive and purposeful: she prioritizes training her students for their roles as professionals in ways that are accessible and allow classroom and community to inform each other.

"I try to shoot for a standard that is as accessible as possible," says Roggeveen. She recognizes that she cannot adapt to every student's ideal learning environment and she knows that some students face barriers when applying for formal accommodations. To address these challenges, Roggeveen gives all students the same accommodations, such as extra time to complete a task, notes provided in advance, or an extension if requested in advance. Roggeveen believes that student needs should be treated with the same respect and consideration as 'real world professionals' as they strive to be successful and prepare for their work lives where these are realities. "If you ask me in advance like a professional would,

then I should treat you like a professional," she says. "In treating them that way, I'm making it so everyone has many possibilities to be successful." Her philosophy is profound yet simple: "It's based on what the learner needs not what I, as the professor, need." She says her approach to building this kind of environment has evolved over time, from starting her career in teaching as a university graduate student where discussions of student accommodation were not as present, to now being a college professor where diversity of needs is recognized and discussed openly. "I think my viewpoint shifted from seeing myself as having to be fairly rigid, saying 'these are the deadlines, these are the rules' to [still having high expectations but it] being taken within the context of the working world that I'm preparing my students for." She says that relationships with students thrive when respect is at the centre of them. "I'd like to think it creates a positive environment for the learners [in that] they feel like I'm there to support them if they need it...Stuff just works in the classroom. It's very easy after we've built that respect with each other."

Roggeveen's innovation within the classroom allows her to be adaptive. "I never stop experimenting," Roggeveen says. "It doesn't always work...but I never keep anything exactly the same". Roggeveen's primary goal is to train students who choose to work with older adults, which she identified as "a population that includes some of our most vulnerable citizens." She notes that every experience in the program is designed to train professionals who will be working to support the psycho-social needs of older adults. Despite their diverse backgrounds and experiences, students share in their commitment to work with older people. "Our students bring with them that passion and commitment to working with this very special client population that many people do not want to work with because of the stigma associated with aging. I think our students are special. They know where they want to end up

and I hope they can see how everything applies on their way to get there.” Roggeveen knows that the professional roles her students will one day have will have a profound impact on society and so she feels a sense of responsibility for this, noting: “If I don’t stay on top of knowing what the developments are in the field my students won’t be ready to do the best work that they possibly can. I have a professional commitment to make sure that I am doing the best I can because if I don’t then ultimately it could have an impact on clients out in the world.”

Roggeveen’s innovative methods have also influenced her colleagues. A number of them have followed her lead in adopting an open approach to their pedagogy. What does this mean? Ultimately, it means that learners are no longer limited by expensive textbooks as she purposely chooses each course reading to ensure that it is not only applicable to course topics but is available through an open or freely available resource as well. Roggeveen knew that something needed to change when using the standard course readings felt ‘purposeless’; few students were buying the required text. “Readings should not be purposeless,” Roggeveen says. If we know the Alzheimer’s Society has very high quality readings, for example, Roggeveen notes that it makes much more sense for the students to be familiar and comfortable with those resources than a cost-prohibitive textbook.

Her decision to go open was also motivated by taking her learners’ perspectives even further. A few years ago, Roggeveen and a colleague were redeveloping a gerontology course and were not able to find relevant resources that were pedagogically suited for the context and learning level of the course. They decided that instead of trying to find something that was ‘right’ they could put together a set of readings of resources available online. “What we

had to do was curate, rather than trying to magically find a textbook that worked." As time went on Alexa learned more about open pedagogy and its potential to create more equity in learning. "How can I test what's going on in the readings if I know there is built-in inequity in access to the readings?"

Roggeveen has also reduced what she calls 'disposable assignments': assignments that have very little relevance once the course is over. She describes these as the papers students write that are looked at by a professor and never read again. "I have the opportunity to get [students] to do things that have value to them." Last year, Roggeveen assigned students in their final semester to complete a health promotion presentation for older adults in the community. The students created the content, organized and delivered the event with a local organization. Students gained networking opportunities and extended their learning into practice; benefits Roggeveen identified as 'real world' rewards. They did not receive a grade for the presentation in the community itself because as Roggeveen says, "at work we don't get grades". While Roggeveen says the students were initially hesitant about the assignment, each felt enormous pride in the work they had done, the connections they made and the impact they had. "We are training students to do very real things [and] we have the opportunity to have them do things that have very real value to them."

Roggeveen further gives back to the community by getting involved. She is an Open Ranger with eCampus Ontario – one of only a few professors – promoting open education. She is also a committee member with the City of Brampton to advocate for designation as a World Health Organization (WHO) Age-Friendly City. Roggeveen says that her involvement in

the latter allows her to bring the work of the committee into the classroom and to bring her work in the classroom back to the community.

Roggeveen's educational roots in cognitive psychology are at the core of her interest in the science of teaching and learning. "I am always wanting to learn about it and do better," says Roggeveen. She acknowledges that her teaching style has shifted over time; naturally becoming "much more interactive and to allow more space for student participation." "Over time I've allowed students more space to offer their own examples or to discuss things, to do activities. I see that as being more a natural part of my practice than before. I think it's just happened organically." Roggeveen says that the longer she teaches and the more she reads she starts to question "the traditional dogma of how we are supposed to be doing this." She is avid on twitter, following educators she respects along with the blogs by people like The Learning Scientists, two cognitive scientists who use evidence based research to examine education. Roggeveen's primary goal in course design and teaching is always 'doing it better'; in doing so, her students benefit from purposeful and applied learning that extends beyond the classroom, where every student has the opportunity to be successful.