

SARAH SINCLAIR

"I am the peer amongst the conversation, rather than the one who claims to know it all," expresses Professor Sarah Sinclair, Coordinator of General Education Electives and professor of Communications and Literary Studies within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. She is describing her role in a class group activity that she designed to build student empowerment and a sense of ownership in learning. Sinclair's dedication to helping students discover their voice and express their voice places her as a Sheridan Nominee for the 3M National Teaching Fellowship Award. At the core of her teaching practice, Sinclair believes in the power of conversations to build, to create, to empower and to transcend.

Sinclair teaches multiple cross-college courses within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Sheridan, including an online course on Memoirs which asks that students not only read and analyze literary texts but also reflect upon their own personal connections to the material. There are four journal assignments spread across the course that tether the course content to a simple question: "How does this connect to you?" prompting students to consider their field of practice, goals in the workplace, and lived experiences. It is through this interrogative conversation that Sinclair attempts to transcend the cross-disciplinary nature of the course so that students can see these "aren't just stories in a vacuum" but rather ones the students can bring their own experiences to. Whether it be trades or social work, Sarah helps her students "find a way to bring their experiences to the stories and see how literature really can have meaning to them [in their professional worlds]."

For many students, this is a new conversation. But its importance, Sinclair maintains, is in encouraging the students to talk to one another: "I encourage students to go find someone in another program that [they] do not know because their perspectives are going to bring so much more to the conversation." Sinclair teaches both traditional face-to face, hybrid and online courses and she admits that it can become more difficult to establish a learner-centered classroom in the online context. Yet, to encourage online learners to interact meaningfully with each other, she integrates many opportunities for discussion. Sinclair acknowledges that to help foster community she "insert(s) myself in to those conversations," in order to help the students build on ideas and make connections between their thoughts and each other. However, ultimately she credits the students: "They create this wonderful learning community which allows us to have that learner-centred experience in a virtual classroom where they do not necessarily see each other's faces."

Although students often question why they need a communication or General Education class as part of their program, Sinclair insists that there is subtle learning that occurs, a "developing [of] skills through content that may not always be so obvious to a student." Sinclair teaches students *how* to have conversations and encourages them to meet peers who are not in the same discipline, knowing it can enrich learning and sometimes leads to new friendships or even professional connections. As she says "we have more in common than we expect" and General Education courses provide opportunities for students to find those connections. "The way that you present your ideas, the way you feel comfortable in sharing an opinion and doing so in a way that is respectful of the diversity of ideas in the room - that is a skill that you will always need."

In her classes, Sinclair strives to give students “a chance to take what they know in their own program” and consider their writing, presentation, and critical thinking skills in a new context. They are asked to consider their skills in a way that might be outside of their usual way of thinking, and engage in activities meant to build community with peers who do not have the same background. In one of these courses, students are asked to take ownership of a topic - in this case a world myth - by investigating it fully, connecting it to the content of the course and then sharing their learning and study notes with the rest of the class. Sinclair says that she loves it when her students have that sense of empowerment and “take on that ownership of the knowledge and of the learning and become a resource for their peers.” It moves her from the front of the classroom to being an engaged participant alongside her students, where the loud “buzz” in the room often means they have forgotten she is there.

When students come to Sinclair with questions, she always responds by starting the conversation from a strengths-based perspective: “You’ve got ideas. You’ve thought about it. You’ve read about it. What do you think? Tell me more.” By leaving space for those questions, Sinclair says it is especially inspiring for her when students realize “I can own this. I can do this. That’s my voice on the paper.” Sinclair is willing to work with students extensively, even outside of class time, to help them identify their strengths and to build on them. She wants all students to be able to join the conversation with their own voice – and realize that through writing and the expression of ideas, they have a voice worth recognizing. “The strength and confidence they get [when building these skills] are incredible,” Sinclair says with pride. “We don’t often enough tell students what they are good at [or] start from a place of strength and I think that we need to find a way to start the conversation with ‘what are you already good at?’...and then look at how we build on that.”

Sinclair also responds to student needs and is willing to try new things. "I never teach a class the same way," says Sinclair. "Every day something shifts in how I approach the content of my courses." Her innovative methods have facilitated conversations across disciplines on campus and led to collaborations focused on improving student learning. Sinclair created an online orientation for students enrolled in General Education elective courses which includes interactive learning activities for students to learn about everything from what they can expect in their courses to better understanding academic integrity using an open-source coding program called H5P. Sinclair recalls that while experimenting with the tool she and a librarian colleague posted it to a shared Sheridan website and, "a colleague from another Faculty reached out [saying] this is a great activity – 'can we talk about how to build this? This would be valuable to our students" which led to other opportunities to connect and collaborate with colleagues in other areas. Sinclair sees this type of community building as having enormous value since "ultimately the [cross-college courses provided by her Faculty] touch every program."

This is not the first time Sinclair has been a part of collaborative initiatives across campus to address student needs. Sinclair was involved in helping to create an ESL library space for second language learners, recalling how one colleague "started the conversation" and how another "wouldn't let it go," leading them to work together to create a space designed to reflect the needs of this specific student population. This is a conversation that Sinclair extends beyond Sheridan, being actively involved in a TESL teaching association in Durham region. The association hosts professional development workshops and social opportunities for members within the region. Members participate in networking opportunities built around activities such as the exchanges of lessons, books or tech tools in

addition to biannual workshops on professional development topics, including how to support students with mental health issues and engage with current pedagogy. She feels it is a meaningful space to “share each other’s knowledge and connect on best practices.”

Opening conversations that lead to community connection is the essence of Sinclair’s professional dedication. “So much of what has influenced my practice has been those serendipitous-eureka-moments –those ‘Hallway Moments’ and unique collaborative communities – they inform who we are, what we do and how we make things better.” She does a lot of traveling between campuses and one of her favourite questions to ask her colleagues is “what are you doing that’s new in your teaching?” Sinclair explains how such collaboration allows ideas to build, and in this way, “sometimes I’m getting ideas, and sometimes I’m giving ideas and that’s how you keep engaged.” She acknowledges that it can be easy to get isolated in one’s practice but that those connections keeps her going - a few years ago when she and a group of colleagues gathered to re-work a course “without realizing it we had developed this amazing community of practice,” one enriched by the diversity of their collective knowledge, background and perspectives.

Sinclair enriches her students’ experience and strives to help students claim their voice and to join the conversation. “When I came out of grad school, [Victorian Literature] was going to be my world. That is not my world anymore – and I am ok with it. I am lucky to have found a place that I can support students finding their voice. Ultimately, if you leave my class knowing how to present your voice whether spoken or written,[and you know] that you have a voice worthy of being spoken and worthy of being listened to – then I have done my job.”