

Introducing experience to the classroom to change perceptions

May 4 2011, By Jane Hurly

(PhysOrg.com) -- It's not unusual for students to send Joanna Clair photos of washroom signs.

But this isn't for an unusual art project either; it's a lesson in awareness and building better understanding of the language and symbols associated with disability and how those enhance or detract from perceptions, attitudes and assumptions about people who experience disabilities.

It's all part of Clair's class within the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation at the University of Alberta that explores physical activity and recreation for special populations, and one of the challenges is to open students' eyes to prejudice and stimulate new ways of thinking about disability.

"A great learning moment in the class is when we look at language and disability," she says. "For example, we look at the symbols on accessible washrooms and the words these symbols evoke. Students often say 'weak, old, inactive, frail and needy.' But if you change the image by putting the arm back as though the person were pushing off, or draw speed lines behind the wheels the image becomes strong and athletic with just two changes."

Because Clair believes that experience is the best teacher, students have opportunities to learn from and interact with individuals with a variety of disabilities, including those who have spinal-cord injuries, stroke,

muscular dystrophy, hearing impairments or double-limb amputations. “When the students share a lived experience and meet a real person with a disability, they see the person first,” says Clair.

Clair—who recently received a lectureship in the faculty to teach courses in adapted physical activity as well as her second-year class—will also teach three senior-level courses: one on assessment and service delivery for special populations, one on [physical activity](#) for older adults and another on active living for individuals with developmental disabilities.

“My intent is to dispel myths,” Clair says, adding that she’s a firm believer in community service learning. To that end she’s developed strong ties to community associations so the students’ learning is peppered with [experiences](#) of working alongside people with disabilities. “When students have an experience working with a person with Down Syndrome, autism or cerebral palsy, they can understand so much better, and it gives them that all-important one-on-one contact, opening them up to a new experience and view of people with disabilities.”

At heart, says Clair, it’s the rewards of teaching that drive her. “I love the classroom. I like it because it’s tangible and because you can often get an immediate sense of engagement, excitement and interest from the [students](#). Most of all I want to create a learning environment that inspires them.”

Provided by University of Alberta

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