Furman Magazine

Volume 51
Issue 3 *Winter 2009*

Article 13

1-1-2009

Unconventional approach serves Dripps well

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Weston Dripps has never been one to follow the conventional route.

His nonconformist side manifested itself at an early age. While other neighborhood kids sold lemonade, young Weston sold rocks he dug up in his backyard.

And after teaching at Furman for only three years, Dripps did yet another unconventional thing — at least, for such a junior faculty member. He earned the **Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Teaching** for 2007-08.

No doubt his refusal to conform to traditional teaching methods helped pave the way to the honor. One example: His "Earth Science and the Silver Screen" course, in which he disguises an introductory class in earth sciences as an exercise in film criticism.

In the course, students dissect films with environmental themes, such as "Armageddon," "The Day After Tomorrow" and "The Core." Under Dripps' careful direction, they sort out the geological and environmental truths, partial truths and flat-out fictions portrayed on the big screen — all the while developing an understanding of the films' underlying scientific concepts.

This approach to the course fits perfectly with Dripps' teaching philosophy. Instead of taking a content-heavy, text-oriented tack, he believes he connects with more students when he veers off the beaten lecture path.

"I focus on trying to make students grasp the relevance of earth science and environmental science to everyday life," he says. "I try to get them to develop their natural, genuine curiosity, to understand how the world works from an earth systems standpoint.

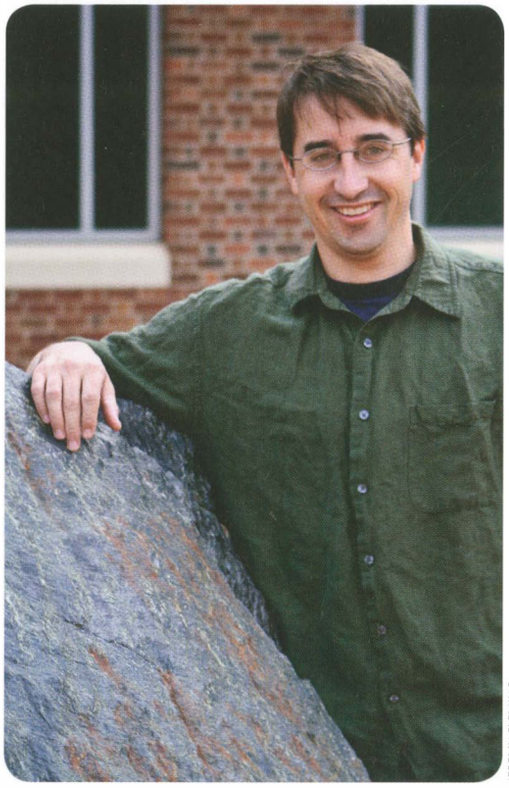
"What I hope to instill in them is that there's so much more to earth science than just rocks. I try to help them realize that whether they go on to major in English or Spanish, they're going to be in positions where they'll have to make decisions that are tied to the environment and to the Earth."

Dripps realizes that students frequently enroll in earth and environmental sciences classes with little to no advance interest in the subject, and that many just see the courses as the fulfillment of a graduation requirement. Such thoughts are totally foreign to him — when he entered Amherst College as an undergraduate, he was so enamored with fossils, rocks and all things earthy that he never thought of studying anything else.

Yet he accepts these student attitudes as a challenge to make environmental science interesting and pertinent to their lives. He reels them in with his creativity, passionate teaching style, high energy and deep concern for their welfare, both in and out of the classroom.

His efforts have drawn the attention of faculty colleagues as well as students (waiting lists for Dripps' courses are not uncommon). When A. Scott Henderson, associate professor of education, heard through the grapevine about Dripps' classroom acumen, he decided to drop by his colleague's introductory EES course and see what the fuss was about.

Henderson says he was immediately impressed by Dripps' scholarly and intellectual prowess. "I think that Wes' greatest asset is his ability to translate content knowledge into explanations and illustrations that are understandable to non-experts — and even to those who are not scientists.



JEREMY FLEMING

"Needless to say, without the ability to communicate with individuals outside one's field, the degree to which a certain amount of knowledge has been mastered is fairly irrelevant — unless you enjoy having conversations with yourself or the other three or four people on the planet who can understand what you are saying," Henderson says.

— TINA TARKINGTON UNDERWOOD