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Taking the Conversation from the Class to the Community

Mardi Mileham
Linfield College

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Taking the conversation from the class to the community

David Sumner wants to start a conversation - in the classroom, in the community and virtually anywhere people meet.

This conversation is anything but idle chatter - it's filled with references to literature and rich personal experiences motivated by a genuine interest in hearing the discoveries and ideas of others.

That desire to generate discussions helped launch MacReads, an annual community book club open to all local residents, book enthusiasts, and high school and college classes. Once the text is selected, a series of conversations is organized, usually led by Linfield faculty and McMinnville residents. The program culminates in a campus reading by the author, where participants engage in a wide-ranging discussion. Selections have included David James Duncan's *The Brothers K* and David Quammen's *Song of the Dodo*. This year's book is Tracy Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World*. Kidder will present a reading at Linfield on March 1 as part of presidential inauguration week activities.

Sumner, an assistant professor of English and director of the college writing program, believes a core value of a liberal education is to engage the wider community in discussions about important and interesting issues. One way to do that is through literature. Every poem, novel or play makes an argument and that argument has implications for how people interact and live together, he said.

"If we are going to exist as a community, we have to be able to share our beliefs with one another," he added. "I'm very interested in how the arguments we make and the way we negotiate our views as a community lead us down certain paths. Can we do that in a way that respects the human being behind it? Can we do that in a way where we actually engage ideas that are beyond the prejudices we all bring to the table?"



David Sumner, assistant professor of English and director of the writing center, encourages his students to think critically and express their ideas during discussions in the classroom.

That same attitude permeates his classroom, where Sumner encourages students to think critically, connect reasons with their beliefs and express their ideas in a public way.

"I want my students to think about how we evaluate the world and how we talk about it, without being foolishly simplistic," he said. "I want to engage in a kind of ethical dialogue, but an ethical dialogue that is sophisticated, nuanced and not reductive."

Barbara Seidman, dean of faculty, commends Sumner for "placing his considerable expertise and enthusiasm to work as an advocate for the role of writing - and reading closely the good writing of others - as a vehicle for the deep learning that epitomizes a liberal arts education."

Sumner, an outdoor enthusiast, specializes in American nature writing and western American literature. He will take his expertise to the University of Bayreuth in Germany this spring under the prestigious Fulbright Junior Faculty Lectureship program. There he will teach two courses: Western Myth and Western Literature, and American Nature Writing. Sumner believes teaching and living in a different culture will help him broaden his perspective, which will benefit his students as well as himself.

Watching students begin to formulate their own world view - as opposed to their teachers' or their parents' - is the inspiration that keeps him in the classroom.

"The most exciting thing about teaching is when the students encounter ideas and begin to take command, to think about them and begin to negotiate their relationship with the world for themselves," he said. "It's exciting to come across a new idea or a new way of seeing an idea. Your world expands or adjusts or slightly changes. And that's what education should be."

- Mardi Mileham