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Engaging Students Subtly

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Engaging students subtly

It was one of those moments that make all the others worthwhile.

During a class critique, Linfield College Art Professor Ron Mills and his students admired an inspired series of paintings by a particularly shy student. The work stunned the class, and surprised even the student, but her eyes sparkled with pride and self-confidence that Mills knew would stay with her for years to come.

The moment, along with others throughout his career, confirmed Mills' commitment to teaching. For his dedication, Mills received the Edith Green Distinguished Professor Award for excellence in teaching and research last spring. The award is made annually to a Linfield faculty member who has demonstrated outstanding performance in teaching and related faculty roles.

"The teaching of art provides opportunities to engage the deepest levels of human development, including my own," said Mills, the son of a painter who also began painting at an early age.

With a bachelor's degree from the University of California and a master of fine art from Claremont Graduate School, Mills considered studying Jungian psychology and art therapy, but after coming to Linfield as a visiting artist in 1980, he decided to teach instead.

"It was the right choice for me," said Mills. "I not only get plenty of chances to counsel students through emotional issues related to their art, but I am also able to participate in their intellectual formation."

Surrounded by art and the curiosity of his students, Mills has melded teaching, painting and research into a rich career spanning two countries. Thanks to a

Linfield faculty development grant, he

spent part of last year in Costa Rica studying indigenous tribal groups, as he has for the past two decades since first traveling there as a senior Fulbright research fellow. He and Jorge Luis Acevedo, a Costa Rican ethnomusicologist, continue to enrich their collections of indigenous art at Centro Neotrópico Sarapiquí, a Costa Rican museum.

As a teacher, Mills tries to engage students subtly, an ongoing challenge for educators. He has gone beyond simply relating facts, vocabulary and concepts to his students and constantly looks for ways to instill individual potential.

"Students generally hate being taught things overtly," he said. "It likely seems too staid, like advice from a dull uncle."

In addition to his teaching and research responsibilities, Mills has nurtured a successful career as an artist.

"We need to practice what we do in order to mentor, to establish credibility, to manifest who we say we are to our students," Mills explained. "Curiously, while I work in my studio, ways of making teaching more vivid frequently come to me. Like so much else in life, the best comes unbidden."

Mills began showing his art professionally while in graduate school, and has since been featured in dozens of solo and collective exhibits in several countries. He has also painted four murals, one of them in Walker Hall, the other three in Latin America. He's working on a new body of paintings for solo exhibitions at Linfield and in Oaxaca, Mexico, next year.

And like any good teacher, Mills continues to grow.

"What I learned as a rookie I am still learning: that teaching art, beyond simple technical instructions, is really about setting up conditions in which it can happen in a thoughtful and supportive context; that listening is at least as important as eloquent oration; and that good students often have disarmingly creative ways of forcing even seemingly simple matters to be rethought."

(The Edith Green Distinguished Professors Panel will be held Friday, Nov. 5, at 7:30 p.m. in Nicholson Library. Panelists include Ron Mills, professor of art; Linda Olds, professor of psychology; and Mike Roberts, professor of biology.)

— Laura Davis

Ron Mills, Edith Green Distinguished Professor, with Erin Gorringer '04, leads drawing, painting, print making and alternative media classes.

