



Research Spotlight: Tracey Bowen

Meet Tracey Bowen, 2018 winner of the James W. Wilson Award (For Outstanding Contribution to Research in the Field of Cooperative Education and Internships)

Tell us about yourself Tracey, how did you get interested in experiential learning research?

I am an Assistant Professor, Teaching Stream in the Institute of Communication, Culture, Information, and Technology at the University of Toronto Mississauga. My research specialization is Visual Communications and Visual Literacy as well as Student Identity Construction in relation to work-integrated learning. I have always been interested in experiential learning, particularly in my former positions in Art Education. Before going to Grad school and becoming an academic, I was (and still try to create new work) a visual artist working in mixed media. My initial foray into experiential learning was when I was an artist in residence within the Greater Toronto area. Research in this case was related to the students' experiences of using visual means to explore the world. I was introduced to my "educational hero" at that time, Maxine Greene. I see research as part of the ex-

perience of being an educator. I look on my classroom as a lab where I collaborate with my students to examine big questions. I use this approach to research whether examining those questions in relation to visual communications or when trying to make sense of the complexities of transitioning from being a student to being a professional within the workplace. The WIL research always emerges from questions that emerge within the classroom.

Tell us about your current research.

I am currently examining the perceptions and perspectives of WIL students on gender bias within their WIL placements. This refers to the issues I mentioned previously. The research is based on questions that emerged from some of the Critical Incident Reports (reflective writing assignments) submitted by students in my fourth year internship class. I work in a STEM discipline, and send out approximately 100

students per year into tech-based companies. Many of the female students got interested in digital media because of the recruitment campaigns to engage more girls and young women in STEM in high school. However, the reality is that they are treated differently than the male students in the workplace. This is a huge gap in trust and is confounding (and frustrating) for so many of the female interns. I feel that it is my duty to examine ways to help all students advocate for themselves and for others so they can speak up against bias and discrimination within the workplace. The implications of the findings of this study will be used to develop the WIL curriculum in my department, and hopefully others.

What has been your most significant research achievement?

Winning the Wilson award!

Who is your role model and why?

As I mentioned previously, Maxine Greene is my Education Hero. She wrote a book called *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on education, the arts and social change*, which changed my worldview. In her book Greene charges all educators to ask themselves and their students: what else is possible? I use that as my mantra and I think you can go anywhere if that is your starting point.

In your opinion, what are the most important issues facing experiential learning today and how can research contribute to their evolution?

I think we have done a great deal of research on skill transfer and the importance of WIL as a vehicle for students to see how well they have gained the knowledge and capabilities they need

to be successful in the workforce post-graduation. What we haven't done very well, is focus on students' personal growth in terms of self-advocacy, empathy and resilience. We also assume that the graduate attributes that are privileged in so much WIL research, are universal in nature and provide appropriate measurements for predicting student success. However, students are not a homogenous group. Female students are not treated in the same way as their male colleagues, and we don't even know how LGBTQ students negotiate WIL placements, or if they feel excluded from the whole discussion. We need to examine these issues more closely, acknowledging the nuances and particularities.

For someone who might consider getting involved with research, what background or skills are most important?

Research is both an art and an intellectual endeavor. You need to be curious, thorough, and flexible. You need to respect the integrity of the process, the participants, and the discipline. However, you need a good question – something that is interesting, needs some attention and will have practical implications in the world. But even good questions need fresh perspectives, and above all an open mind. Research is not carried out in a vacuum. You need to be willing to call on others, to engage those with expertise to ensure that what you are finding has merit. And, research findings must be shared, so excellent communication and writing skills are paramount.

***Editor's Note:** James W. Wilson was the Asa S. Knowles Professor of Cooperative Education and Director of Northeastern's Cooperative Education Research Center for many years. In 1987, he co-authored a comprehensive book about cooperative education, *Cooperative Education in a New Era*, as well as numerous other books and articles. He edited the *Journal of Cooperative Education*, and for many years conducted annual surveys of co-op programs in the USA. He arguably was the most prominent researcher in cooperative education in the second half of the last century. This award recognizes outstanding contributions to the promotion and advocacy of research activity in cooperative education. The award is not given every year. The award is competitively determined and is intended to recognize longstanding contributions to the field both by participating in research activity and providing leadership for others.*