

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: SUPPORTING UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION AT WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

## "Toxic Emotions at Work"

### Peter Frost visits campus Feb. 4

—University of British Columbia business professor Dr. Peter Frost will discuss his research and his new book, *"Toxic Emotions at Work"* (Harvard Business School Press, 2003) on Western's campus on Feb. 4, from 4-5:30 PM, in Biology 234. In his book, Frost argues that a world run on human capital requires human responses to the often harsh realities of business, and most leaders are shirking this vital responsibility. Consequently, self-appointed pain managers—"toxin handlers"—are currently shouldering the burden of emotional pain for entire organizations. In an interview with PRAXIS, Dr. Frost explains how his research applies to the higher education environment:

**PRAXIS:** In your book, you give a couple instances of toxic environments at universities. How do those environments differ from those at corporations? Or, do they?

**FROST:** Universities and corporations are similar in these ways: Their success rests in good part on the people who work in them and their motivation, their commitment and their talents; when their employees are given respect and support they thrive and perform well; when their experience of their workplace is negative, when their self-esteem and confidence are diminished by what they encounter from bosses, peers or subordinates, their loyalty and the

quality of their output suffers.

They are different in these ways: The negative effects of toxicity show up more quickly in corporations (bottom-line indicators may reflect a falling off of effort and effectiveness) and in theory, there may be quick responses to the sources of the toxins. (Actually, it is rare that constructive responses happen quickly, but relative to the responses in a university, one might say that it is so.) One big difference between universities and corporations is this speed of response to toxicity. In part this is because of the absence of clear indicators of the effects of toxicity on

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## E V E N T S

### JANUARY

#### The REAL First Year Student

Thurs., Jan. 8, at 4 – 5 PM, MH 186

According to Beloit College's 2003 Mindset List, this year's first-year students:

- Have never gotten excited over a telegram, a long distance call or a fax.
- Have always had a PIN number.
- Have been "dissing" and "burning" things all their lives.
- Think that "Ctrl Alt Del" is as basic as "ABC."

We've all heard that "knowing your audience" is a key element to effective instruction. Karen Casto and Justina Brown from the Center for Instructional Innovation will share results from recent national and WWU surveys, as well as REAL, a reality-based video chronicling the first quarter of four WWU freshmen.

### FEBRUARY

#### Using Real Data in the Classroom

Thurs., Feb. 5, at 3:30 - 5 PM, VU 567

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## Engineering and Society: New course enhances student success in the 21st century workplace

Jeff Newcomer, Barbara Sylvester, Kathleen Kitto

In 2001, after careful planning, the Engineering Technology Department introduced a new course, *Engineering and Society, ETEC 341*, designed to boost our graduates' success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The course responds to our alumni suggestions for more instruction in communication skills. It also satisfies both Western's upper-division writing requirement and our accreditation board's new ethics requirement. In this busy course, we examine the relationship of engineering to society, illustrate the value of skillful technical communication, highlight ethical is-

suess and expectations in the profession, and emphasize the responsibility of individual professionals, often working in complex organizations, to make ethical decisions.

The course (enrollment of 20 students) is team-taught by a writing instructor assigned to the department half-time and by rotating, tenured ETEC faculty. This disciplinary partnership embodies one of the guiding instructional principles of the department: to teach both communication skills and ethics in the

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## INSIDE

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## Spotlight on new faculty

Fallou Ngom,  
Modern & Classical Languages



Language is power, Fallou Ngom believes, and in more ways than one.

“If students combine an understanding of language with linguistics, it’s very powerful,” he explained. “It gives them very marketable skills for many jobs in today’s world.”

Ngom joined Western’s Modern and Classical Languages Department as an assistant professor in Fall 2002, and teaches French language, linguistics, and phonology classes. He came to Western after earning his Ph.D. in French Linguistics from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and he explains that he chose the campus for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, Ngom said, was the caliber of the Modern and Classical Languages Department. He was also attracted to the department because he shared with a number of its faculty a background and research interest in both language and linguistics. Ngom also likes the idea of living in a small city, and, despite the temperature differences, Bellingham’s rainy climate and greenery remind him of his native Senegal on the west coast of Africa.

Ngom estimates he speaks “ten or eleven” languages, which, in addition to French and English, include Wolof, Arabic, and Portuguese Creole. Part of his multilingual capabilities he credits to growing up in southwest Senegal, where many languages were spoken “and if you wanted to talk to your friends and neighbors, you learned how to speak them.”

Ngom believes strongly in helping his students learn and use language in real-world contexts. Possessing knowledge of more than one language and understanding the roots of language can, Ngom asserts, open doors for employment in settings that range from translating technical manuals to the relatively new field of forensic linguistics. He regularly shares job opportunities with his students.

“I want my students to be in the real world as participants,” Ngom added. “Language and linguistics together give students unique opportunities to understand other cultures.”

### EVENTS, continued from pg. 1

*“The explosion in both the amount and variety of quantitative information, and the necessity of using such information in daily decisions, make the need for quantitative literacy both new and urgent.” —Randall Richardson and William McCallum*

Join professors from departments across campus, including English, Sociology, and Mathematics, as they describe strategies for integrating components of quantitative and symbolic reasoning into their course curricula. Refreshments will be served.

For more information, please contact: Karen Casto, x/4943 or Karen.Casto@wwu.edu

### MARCH

**Weapons of Mass Instruction (Or, Doing**

### More with Less)

*Thurs., March 4, at 4-5 PM, MH 186*

As fiscal resources shrink and class sizes grow, faculty face a bigger challenge in how to infuse innovative instructional methods into their large lecture courses. Join a panel of Western faculty members from various departments who’ve found some cost-effective ways to both save time and help their students learn.

*The “First Thursday” professional development series is sponsored by The Center for Instructional Innovation and Teaching-Learning Academy, with support from the Office of the VPUE. For a complete listing of events, go to the CII website: <http://pandora.cii.wwu.edu/cii/> and click the link to “workshops & events.”*

## Teaching & Learning NEWS IN BRIEF

### WORK OF TEACHING LEARNING FELLOWS NOW ONLINE—

You may recall that last summer, four faculty and their student partners participated in a pilot project to design and implement systematic assessment of student learning in their undergraduate courses.

The Teaching and Learning Fellows, collectively called the TLF, have written up reports on how they re-designed their respective courses to more closely align with intended and measurable student learning outcomes. The reports—along with an overview of the project, written by project manager Janice Lapsansky—have been posted on the Center for Instructional Innovation website.

The four faculty TLF members are: Scott Brennan (Environmental Studies); Thor Hansen, Geology; Kathleen Kennedy (History); and Mike Mana (Psychology).

They will serve as campus resources on student learning and assessment throughout this academic year. Resources and financial support for the TLF and student research partners were provided by the Office of the Provost and the Office of Institutional Assessment, Research, and Testing.

To read about the TLF’s work, go to the CII website: <http://pandora.cii.wwu.edu/cii> Click the link to “teaching and learning resources,” then click the section “assessment & outcomes.” Once there, click the link to “Teaching and Learning Fellows Summer Project 2003.”

### GET “BETWEEN THE LINES” WITH NEWS DISCUSSION SALON—

Join fellow faculty, students and staff for ongoing and open-ended discussion of news and issues of the day. “Between the Lines” meets every Thursday, 11 AM in VU 714, beginning on Jan. 8. The forum is sponsored by The Golden Key Honour Society with support from the Office of the VPUE. For more information, contact Ann Carlson, Ann.Carlson@wwu.edu, x/2345.

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the university organization and in part because of the complexity and even loose connections between parts of the university system, the toxins don't get drained off, they lie around and pool making some sites very unhealthy for long periods of time.

The quality of management of university systems is perhaps more uneven in universities than in corporations. In universities there is frequently less training and development of administrators, especially those from academia who are asked to "do their turn" as department heads and who find themselves professionally unprepared for the challenges of managing others and of negotiating the complex systems in which they must function as leaders. (They usually are not interested in making a career of such work and will return to research and teaching once their term is completed.) Consequently, a lot of pain can be unwittingly created in the university because the level of managerial competence is less than it should be for the task at hand.

*You discuss how toxic emotions in the workplace can translate into diminished profits and a loss of key personnel. At a university, how might such toxicity affect students in the classroom?*

FROST: When people are contaminated by toxins in their workplace it is very difficult for them to contain their hurt, their anger, and their frustration, and it spills out into all or most of their activities. Toxic teachers are not likely to be in an emotional space that enables them to communicate respect, care and enthusiasm for knowledge to their students. Teachers fulfill a leadership function in the classroom and if they set a negative tone that diminishes the esteem of their students it contributes to a climate of fear and of self-protection. When someone is experiencing emotional toxicity it typically manifests as their being obsessed by the condition, of being disconnected from work and of channeling their emotional and intellectual energy into trying to cope with the pain. Their focus is not on work performance. It is not on the needs and desires of others. Students get a technical performance at best from toxic teachers. They may

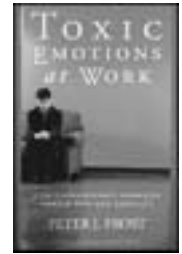
simply go through the motion of teaching new knowledge. There is no room in their delivery for positive emotion. In fact, I have observed how some toxic teachers will take out their feelings on students and demoralize them, and in the process they defeat a student's love of learning and desire to grow. In such classes, one can see a high degree of defensive behavior by students and a lack of sparkle and liveliness.

*What simple things can a department do to first determine if its environment is toxic, and then take steps toward "de-toxifying" it?*

FROST: Quantitatively one can look at absenteeism and sick leave to see what is going on. High frequencies of stress-related or mentally induced illness may be a signal of systemic toxicity, or suggest that someone who is suffering is feeling unsupported and does not want to show up at work. Grievances, formal or otherwise that indicate bullying or poor interpersonal relations can be examined to see what the causes might be. The effects are invariably toxic. Talking to one's staff and one's peers about what is working and what is not in the team or the department can be helpful especially if one is willing to listen. The core of toxic emotions is a loss of hope or confidence or self esteem. So what is the health of the unit? What do people tell you by their body language, their eyes or their general demeanor on a daily basis? Is there a sense of zest in the room or is it more one of gloom and depression?

Perhaps the most basic antidote to the toxicity and the way to begin to "detoxify" the condition is to take the time to really listen to people in the situation. It sounds obvious and over-simplified to pursue this action. However, if we examine how little time, training or support we get for listening to one another, it becomes clear that it is not easy to do, unless we are prepared to slow down for a few minutes, turn off the phone and the laptop, put aside the chatter in one's head about the next meeting coming up, or the fight in the last one, or the long list of deadlines that one is chasing and find a few human moments when we are psychologically and physically "there" for the other person. It is quite astonishing how often

TOXIC  
EMOTIONS AT  
WORK:  
PETER FROST  
Wed., Feb. 4  
4 - 5:30 PM  
Biology 234



The campus community is cordially invited to attend this special presentation. Frost's visit is co-sponsored by the CII, TLA, and Western's Center for Excellence in Management Education (CEME). For more information, contact CEME Director Joseph Garcia, (Joseph.Garcia@wwu.edu)

someone can begin to recover their sense of purpose and to start coping again after someone, a colleague or a boss gives them this moment of respectful engagement and signals that the person matters and someone is listening.

The dissipation of toxins comes when people begin to feel hopeful again. So, managers who are supportive to their staff, who are available to them and responsive to the issues they raise tend to have success in their efforts to handle toxic situations. Such efforts may include removing a known source of the toxicity from their staff's workplace....whether this is an offending person or a dysfunctional policy or practice.

*Your book touches on areas more often discussed in self-help or psychology books than in traditional publications on organizations and business practices. Even your title uses the word "compassion." When you were writing "Toxic Emotions," were you concerned it might be perceived as too "touchy-feely" by mainstream business execs?*

FROST: This is an excellent question. The answer is no. A key reason for this came from the sources of my writing and any insights I might have had. The stories in my book about toxicity

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PRAXIS is published quarterly throughout the academic year by the Office of the Vice Provost of Undergraduate Education. Created as a forum for faculty and student support professionals on Western's campus, PRAXIS promotes the exchange of ideas and provides information on upcoming events and topical issues in teaching and learning at the undergraduate level.

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## Peter Frost, *continued from pg. 3*

and about compassion come from managers, often line or project managers who spent considerable time in the trenches. They come from leaders and organizations with strong credentials as top performers in their industries (John Chambers CEO of Cisco, the management and culture of Southwest Airlines, the top team at *Newsweek* magazine, for example). It quickly became clear to me that issues of toxicity were everywhere and that compassionate responses made a difference not only to the lives of those affected but also to the goals and objectives of the organizations involved. Furthermore, the strongly supportive responses of people who have heard me talk about these issues or who have read the articles and the book and written to me (see [www.toxinhandler.com](http://www.toxinhandler.com)) affirm how much emotional pain is out there in organizations and how hungry people are for help.

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## Engineering and Society, *continued from pg. 1*

technical context of the discipline.

Right or wrong, students perceive courses that are “part of their major” as being more relevant and significant than other courses. For engineering technology students, this perception occurs, most likely, because they rarely have the practical experience necessary to understand the interactions between technology and communication and ethics. While most ETEC students have great confidence in their analytical ability to unravel vexing technical difficulties, they haven't yet developed sound approaches to the types of ethical problems or communication demands they'll face on the job.

*ETEC 341* connects engineering technology and ethics by drawing an analogy between the process of engineering design and the process of solving ethical problems. Our purpose is to help students first construct a framework for considering personal values and professional ethics and then develop a process for making ethical decisions. To do this, we examine exemplary case studies that range from organizational, interpersonal dilemmas to great public, technical disasters (the Challenger and Columbia disasters, the Bellingham pipeline explosion).

We also review professional codes of ethics and stress the responsibility of technical professionals to work within their areas of competence and hold paramount the well-being and safety of the public.

To improve the teamwork skills vital to modern organizational procedures, we provide classroom exercises in effective speaking and accurate listening. Every student presents two PowerPoint briefings (an ethical case study and a proposal) and receives immediate peer feedback on both content and delivery.

Both listeners and speakers are graded. Each student receives two opportunities to speak, and the second pre-

sentations almost always improve dramatically.

Since technical writing also parallels the engineering design process, we make that connection and then assign some of the most common types of writing done by technical professionals. As often as possible, the writing connects to the ethics material being studied at the time. (For example, students research historic engineering failures or near misses and prepare written summaries that highlight the ethical lessons of the case for the rest of the class.)

Demonstrating the relevance of professional ethics and communication skills to technical topics requires bridging topics in a manner that none of us had ever tried before. Both instructors plan each course, participate in every class, and share the grading burden, which is to the students' advantage, as they get two pairs of eyes with different skills and priorities on every assignment. Faculty take turns leading lectures and discussions, which helps maintain logical and consistent connections among the instructional objectives and provides students with appropriate depth and expertise in each area.

Because they are able to see it in relation to their intended futures, we believe that students put more effort into this course and, hence, get more out of it. (Of interest is the fact that almost all the students keep their writing textbooks—a first in our experience!)

Designing such a course as *ETEC 341* takes more faculty time initially, but discipline-specific communication skills and professional ethics taught within the discipline can yield long-term benefits to departments and their graduates.