English Professor Joyce Kinkead received the D. Wynne Thorne Career Research Award for 2018. Her husband, David Lancy, a professor emeritus of Anthropology, won the award in 2011, making the pair the first couple to receive the research award since it began in 1979. (Donna Barry Photo)

English prof Joyce Kinkead earns USU's top award for her scholarship and advocacy of student inquiry

Words, whether swimming in our brain or inked on paper, are like air – invisible and everywhere at the same time.

We may just scan the text of the wedding announcement for a friend's daughter before tossing the card in the procrastination pile. But some of us, like one undergraduate student in English Professor Joyce Kinkead's research methods class, actually stick our noses in that air.

By the end of a semester-long research project, Deidra Hall had produced original research that teased out a whole range of social constructs illustrated in the wedding announcements of Utah newlyweds, touching on geography, religion, family dynamics, community values.

A project like this illustrates the dual pillars of Kinkead’s academic career. First, her advocacy of undergraduate scholars who conduct significant research that adds to our community knowledge rather than dead-ends in a research paper for a class. Secondly, her own years-long research of the hows, whats and history of the act of writing itself.

In recognition of her 36-year career at Utah State University nurturing writer-scholars and conducting her own research, Kinkead has earned the university’s most prestigious accolade, the D. Wynne Thorne Career Research Award for 2018.

In presenting the award, USU President Noelle Cockett noted Kinkead’s “unmatched” impact on undergraduate research at USU and nationally. “She has worked for years to promote others’ research as well as her own,” Cockett said. “There is no one more deserving.”

Indeed, USU remains a national leader in involving bachelors students in the high-quality research typically done by graduate students. USU’s Undergraduate Research Program, which launched just a few years before Kinkead’s arrival in Utah in 1982, is the second oldest in the nation, second only to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In fact, MIT’s Margaret MacVicar consulted on campus at the invitation of then-USU President Glen Taggart.

Kinkead’s award provides another celebration point. Her husband, David Lancy, a professor emeritus of Anthropology, won the award in 2011, making the pair the first couple to receive the research award since it began in 1979.

Kinkead, a native of Missouri, began her teaching career with a focus on composition studies. But English — writing, that is, not literary studies — has exploded as a popular academic field. There are now more than 100 degree programs in writing across the country, she says. And as a result, she’s refined her phrasing.

She’s focused now on what’s called writing studies, specifically for those students seeking degrees in writing. Composition is what’s done in ENGL 1010, the introduction-to-writing course required of all freshmen.

Even fledging writers can benefit from her insight. “I want students to see that there’s this huge, huge world in writing studies,” she said. “It’s so much more than just school writing.”

Her course on research methods introduces English students to a track of writing very different from the “humanist” writing they’ve been assigned back to their junior-high days, she said. “I’m asking them to write in a social-scientific way and to use quantitative information and data to support their research,” she said. “It can be very uncomfortable for them.”

By the end of the semester, students in the research methods class have conducted interviews, written textual analysis or case studies, developed surveys, and created posters and lightning talks for dissemination.

“It’s a wonderful class that marries my interest in writing studies and undergraduate research,” she said.
“Undergraduate research can be transformative in a student’s education.”

Kinkead’s current book project looks at writing studies from a global perspective. A Writing Studies Primer is expected to be completed in fall of 2019 at the conclusion of her sabbatical leave. She’s researching writing “writ large,” she says. So there will be chapters on printing presses, the history of paper, as well as writing implements from pencils to keyboards. “I went to Gutenberg’s Museum while in Germany in May,” she added. “And I plan to continue visiting venues important to the development of writing.”

“I have to credit my husband David with getting me interested in the anthropology of writing and its archaeological origins – like oracle bones from China and Sumerian cuneiform,” she said. “Too often, we take writing for granted, and I want to make its history and development more visible.”

How to “BOOK” a trip

English Professor Joyce Kinkead has an innovative way of combining her two passions of reading and traveling. She journeys to some fairly exotic ports of call, but before the bags are even packed, she’s selected a book list that gives her intimate insights into her destination and upgrades her status from vacationist to voyager.

Fortunately for the rest of us, she blogs about “Reading for the Road” at her site, Road Works, at roadworksbooks.wordpress.com.

For those of us who crave book lists, here’s a sampling Kinkead created for a journey to the Galapagos Islands:

Fiction

Mr. Darwin’s Shooter, by Roger McDonald. “My favorite novel of the trip,” she says.

The Evolution of Jane, by Catherine Schine. “Beach read might be best description.”

Galapagos, by Kurt Vonnegut. “Not really about Galapagos, but had to mention.”

The Darwin Conspiracy, by John Darnton. “Was Darwin a fraud and murderer?”

Nonfiction

The Beak of the Finch, by Jonathan Weiner. “Pulitzer Prize-winning explanation of Darwin’s discovery.”

Voyage of the Beagle, by Charles Darwin.