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**REBEKAH NIX, NROC FEATURED TEACHER**

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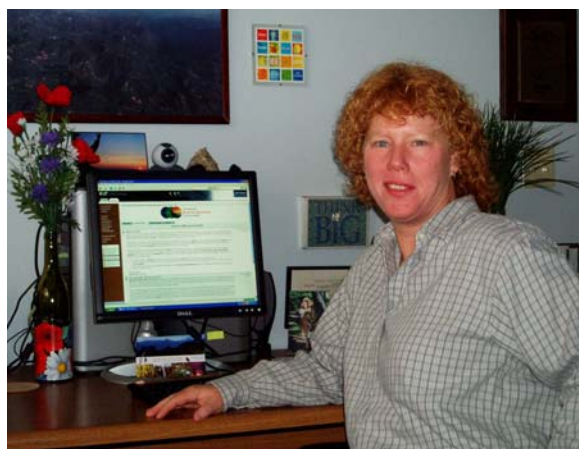
Introduction

NROC's Featured Teacher is Rebekah K. Nix, Ph.D., Senior Lecturer, Teacher Development Center at The University of Texas at Dallas. Rebekah is an advocate of the Open Educational Resource movement and we are proud that she is part of our NROC community. Rebekah will receive a Recognition Certificate and gift card from NROC.

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[Rebekah Nix -Recipient of the Distance Learning Association \(USDLA\) 2007 Best Practices Gold Award for Distance Learning Teaching Online.](#)

Rebekah has worked with the NROC content since receiving a grant from the UT-TeleCampus to explore NROC materials for use in a new Integrated Earth Science for Teachers course. Rebekah embraced the fact that open educational resource materials at HippoCampus can follow individual teachers to their classrooms beyond their semester of enrollment in the Master's Program.

Rebekah says: *It's great to be able to enrich the classroom learning environment with a broader range of expert commentary, professionally-produced simulations, and vetted item descriptions. The variety of media formats (video, flash, and graphical) enables me to enhance this completely online experience for all learners.*

*You have experience with high-tech start-ups. Please tell us about that.*

*Given this advantage of hindsight, the experiences that I had in that "real world" did indeed uniquely prepare me for distance education. I started out as a documentation specialist. That gave me lots of practice with page layout formats and electronic publishing applications. I then moved into the special projects area where I worked alongside software and hardware engineers. As I wrote the technical and end-user guides for proprietary solutions, I was challenged to 'break' the systems - and amazed at*

*how the teams worked together to improve the final design based on customer needs. Eventually I ended up in marketing communications where I prepared training and support materials for an international sales force and third-party add-in modules. I now appreciate those opportunities to understand how the internal and external mechanisms are driven by the creative process of system design, development, delivery, and sustainability.*

**Why did you make the jump to teaching?**

*Watching those venture capitalists work their magic helped me to discover the power of emerging high-tech tools. I had to find a way to realize that potential for my friends who were struggling in the K-12 arena due to poor communications and/or irrelevant training, with respect to emerging technologies. Higher education (i.e. teacher development programs) offered the most effective pathway for my varied abilities. That sounds far nobler than was the reality! I had a most miserable time in my only college computer class. By the time I graduated, I knew that there had to be something more to computers than FORTRAN programming. So, I took what I thought would be a part-time summer job to gain a more practical knowledge of computers. That little self-contained Apple II grew into globally-networked computing systems over time as just detailed. Essentially, I became the ultimate end-user and just wanted to share the satisfaction of being empowered by the rapidly advancing applications of information technology.*

**You also had an amazing on-line education, attending Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Australia. What was that like? What did you gain, both personally and professionally?**

*Oh, yes, that was life-changing in the best ways imaginable. Western Australia in particular is an incredible place with wonderful people. Not only did I gain a working knowledge of the latest research theory and practice in the burgeoning field of learning environments, but I coincidentally added online learning to my list of first-hand end-user experience! In the European tradition, my studies were absolutely relevant to my personal interests and supported my professional goals. The quality of the coursework was more than satisfying. The level of interaction in my online courses was tremendously stimulating. However, on both counts, learning how to establish and to maintain a rich network of peers and colleagues is surely the most valuable outcome of the experience. I'm absolutely amazed at how close my international mates and I remain today.*

**Which NROC materials are you using?**

*Currently, my efforts are focused on the Environmental Science resource. I received an award from the UT-TeleCampus to see how those materials might be used in a new Integrated Earth Science for Teachers course specifically. (Bob Threkeld documented some of that process in his latest article!) In preparation for that work, I did look at all of the natural science courses available in the repository last summer. I love the fact that I can offer much of the same materials to our classrooms teachers beyond their semester of enrollment. I included links to several of the physics items at HippoCampus for the Integrated Physical Science for Teachers course. It's great to be able to enrich the classroom learning environment with a broader range of expert commentary, professionally-produced simulations, and vetted item descriptions. The variety of media formats (video, flash, and graphical) enables me to enhance this completely online experience for all learners.*

**How well are students with little technology experience able to use NROC materials?**

*Because our program is completely online, most of our students are pretty tech-savvy – or have someone who can help them with any challenges. Regardless, one of the main reasons I decided to use the NROC materials is that they are quite user-friendly. (Remember, that's one of my pet peeves!) I find the interfaces used to be efficient and appropriate – and that makes it easy for me to use it too! Once students get over the anxiety of learning online, it's all pretty intuitive when presented within good design in a practical interface.*

**What about those students with a lot of technology experience?**

*Ditto my previous response! The biggest difference I pick up on between the various levels of technology experience probably has more to do with learning style than with tool expertise. Distance education presents a new and different modality for most students... especially if a course is comprised of more than digitized slide shows and lecture notes. The less experienced users tend to feel the need to print everything while the more comfortable users may gloss over important items all too quickly! Being able to present the same basic content in a variety of ways will attend to both audiences and*

*help to reinforce what I think is important within the lesson.*

*One of your courses won the USDLA Gold award last year. Please tell us about the course and the award.*

*Actually, I think it was more for my collective work toward the online Master of Arts in Teaching – Science Education degree program. Offered by the University of Texas at Dallas, it is delivered through the UT-System TeleCampus. (You can find out most everything about the program design and services at [uttc.org](http://uttc.org).) When the shoulders of the 'giants' on which you stand average 4' tall, you either need a lot of them or they have to let you stand there a long while. Receiving the Excellence in Distance Learning Teaching Award is proof that I simply seized the many golden opportunities afforded me to do both! I still can't believe that my students and partners were able to keep the nomination secret. Because they took the time to put in their thoughtful words is what makes the plaque so very special. They are the reason I do any of this! The really exciting thing about this type of recognition is that it just keeps on giving. That USDLA Gold started an incredible momentum that has led to development of an innovative research sequence recognized by UT-System, creation of a variety of faculty resources to support student learning online, awareness of best practices in teaching and learning that promote lifelong learners, and leadership opportunities in technology, higher, distance, science, and literacy education.*

*What is your next project?*

*In addition to rekindling my research agenda, I am eager to redesign my Educational Technology course. I've been teaching graduate and undergraduate sections of this – the first online course I created from scratch – for over 7 years now! It's survived three different course management systems and many tests of time. But my audience is noticeably evolving, so I want to update it in terms of both content and context. I've been working with a librarian to develop a digital 'library laboratory' to promote critical aspects of literacy and pedagogy. It will give my students that first-hand experience with new ideas, new technologies, and new types of learning that they need to meet the needs of our next generation of students, while we share some productive fun!*

*Where do you see online teaching in the next five years?*

*That's an interesting question since I finished my online doctorate almost exactly 5 years ago. I'm so busy trying to keep up that I haven't looked much farther than the Ed Tech course, which I hope has another 7-year shelf life! My ambiguous answer to your question would be 'everywhere', literally. I taught a course from a secluded mountain cabin at 9,000 feet this summer! I've turned in final grades from an airport kiosk in Sydney, Australia. I have no idea where my students actually are when they log into class. And none of that matters! If trends continue as they seem to be going, I expect to see online teaching happening in very different ways: smaller, faster, richer... all better! It will have to be as relevant as today's teaching is rigorous, at least. I also expect that many more markets will converge to take mobile, real-time options to the next level for lifelong learners in a technology-enabled world. It's going to exciting!*

*What's the most exciting part about teaching online?*

*Now, in my courses, because most of the tedious work of teaching (setting up gradebooks, creating content, etc.) has been done, I can keep myself engaged as a true professional by enhancing my courses with new tools and resources that efficiently complement the basic objectives. I am able to foster that individualized attention and focused interaction that made my personal experience so effective. I truly enjoy teaching students with diverse backgrounds in this global community of lifelong learners. The great thing is that everything just keeps getting better – for me and my students!*

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