As a graduate student in the 1980s, Susanne Paterson came to the United States because she wanted the opportunity to teach. At the time, doctoral students in her native England didn’t start teaching until the final year of their PhD program—which seemed to Paterson a little late to figure out if she liked teaching or was even any good at it. By contrast, the first year of her master’s program at Purdue found her teaching composition to undergraduates. “I liked it,” she says, “and luckily, I found out that I was okay at it, as well.”

Anyone who has spent time in Paterson’s classroom would be quick to point out what an understatement her self-assessment is. 2009 marks the second year Paterson has been recognized with the UNH Manchester teaching award, an honor her colleagues say is richly deserved.

“Susi is the best teacher I know,” says Barbara Jago, associate professor of communication arts at UNH Manchester and a 2004 Teaching Excellence award winner. “She takes great care with her teaching, getting to know each and every student and using that knowledge to enhance the learning experience. As a result of my conversations with Susi, I have become a better teacher.”

The high regard in which Paterson is held by her students and colleagues is mutual. Born to parents whose educations were derailed by the events of World War II, Paterson has great respect for the challenges faced and surmounted by many of her students, who, like her, are the first in their families to go to college. “When I see how much our students have to juggle in their day-to-day lives and how committed they are to continuing their educations in the face of obstacles, I realize how lucky I am,” she says. “I work hard for them because they work hard for me.”

Paterson’s identification with those who have to overcome the odds extends even to the courses she most likes to teach. While she enjoys them all, she says her heart is with the Renaissance dramatists—Shakespeare’s contemporaries, in particular, who inevitably are overshadowed by the Bard. “I see it as a public service,” she laughs. “Students discover those writers are really interesting and talented, and deserve their moment in the sun.”

— Kristin Duisberg