University Cup winner Dr Claude Couture thinks that the University of Alberta is helping to change the world.

If that sounds like a big claim, dig a little deeper into the work of the man who wrote several books including a monography of Étienne Parent, a sadly forgotten architect in the 19th century of our institutions and an early visionary of a diverse and complex Canada. You’ll come to understand why Couture has been asked to speak worldwide on the topic of linguistic rights and modernity. “By fighting for bilingualism and their space in the British Empire, French-speaking Canadians contributed in a very modern way to the diversity of Canada,” says Dr Couture, professor at the University of Alberta’s Campus Saint-Jean and editor-in-chief of the International Journal of Canadian Studies.

Diversity, Couture believes, is the key to a peaceful future and a strong Canadian economy. “What we do here, at the U of A in general and at Campus Saint-Jean, has an impact... nationally and internationally. We are contributing to building a global, multi-lingual world,” says Couture.

Couture’s research deals with breaking down barriers and stereotypes. “All societies, traditional or modern, are extremely complex, when you start to study them. Quebec is no exception,” says Couture. “I am from a working class family in Montreal, so when I was an undergraduate student and even before as a teenager, I had a lot of skepticism towards the main narratives I was told about Quebec, Montreal and the place of French Canadians in the modern world. Because my family had been involved even before Confederation in manufacturing and then for the Canadian Pacific Railway company, thus in a very urban environment, the stereotype that Quebec was a rural society until the mid-twentieth century made no sense to me.”

continued overleaf...
The area where Couture grew up in Montreal, called the Mile End, was a very tough place, but it has changed a lot over the years due mainly, to education. "As a legacy of the hard work of the working class people of the generations before, it changed and working class people were gradually replaced, sometimes by their own children and grandchildren, by people with university degrees, most of them working together in mega cultural enterprises like the Cirque du Soleil," he says. "Canadian cultural products generate billions of dollars in the Canadian economy and around the world. Diversification is always very healthy and a guarantee of success."

In his 21 years of teaching at the University of Alberta, Couture has come to believe that the best investment anyone can make is in human intelligence. The classroom is, of course, one of the most profound environments in which to make that investment. What drives people to teach, says Couture, is "simply a deep human need to share a discovery. Every day we have, most of us, a deep need to share new information acquired by reading or something that we have discovered or built or fashioned. This is what the classroom is all about: sharing, sometimes passionately, what we know, what we have discovered... first for ourselves, then for others."