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Awards for Excellence in Teaching

2014

**Presentations to the
Atlantic University Presidents**

**by the recipients of the
2014 Association of Atlantic Universities**

Distinguished Teaching Award

Dr. Martìn Kutnowski
Department of Fine Arts
St. Thomas University

Dr. Peter MacIntyre
Department of Psychology
Cape Breton University

Educational Leadership Award

Dr. Ann Braithwaite
Department of Diversity and Social Justice
University of Prince Edward Island

The Importance of Good Teaching

by
Dr. Martìn Kutnowski
Department of Fine Arts
St. Thomas University

I am honoured by this award, and cherish the privilege of your undivided attention for the next few minutes. But, as Spiderman says, "With great power comes great responsibility," and today I must acknowledge the sustained support I received from many people. In the first place, I must mention St. Thomas University and most specially Dr. James Whitehead, Director of Teaching and Learning. Without his encouragement and guidance, the nomination simply would not have happened. Alongside James, I must mention Roger Moore, Brad Cross, and Doug Vipond, longtime mentors who have supported me in more ways that I could list in the reduced amount of time I have. I am also so proud to share this distinction with two fantastic teachers such as Peter MacIntyre and Ann Braithwaite.

Inquiring *deeper* into whose help I need to acknowledge, I realize that the list is actually very, very long. All my colleagues and staff at STU have helped, one way or another, because it's hard to trace where I learned this or that, where a thought started and developed, be it during a formal teacher training exercise or informally: being part of a community of practice, even an off-the-cuff comment in the elevator may turn into a revealing notion that helps one have a better teaching day.

And then, what about my colleagues at schools where I taught before, such as City University of New York or the Conservatory Manuel de Falla in Argentina? For sure, I also learned so much there. And what about my high school teachers, and my private teachers? Yes, of course, them too. And what about my wife, who is also a piano teacher and with whom I've discussed the problems of teaching music about a million times? And what about my children (my most challenging students), or my brother and sisters (my most helpful classmates), or my parents (my most challenging teachers)…? Yes, all of them are part of who I am and what I have been able to do in life, and so they deserve this recognition.

And then, my students: those who kindly nominated me for the Excellence Award at STU this year, but also those who supported me in the past; those who wrote a kind comment during a course evaluation, or the ones who honestly and constructively pointed out problems in a course, helping me correct it, or those who were not nice, and angrily complained because they hated the class or how I taught it.

Or… even a wider circle than that, I must thank *all* the students (I guess in the thousands now) who *ever* chose me as their teacher. These students entrusted me with their dreams, following the roadmap I proposed, embarking with me in the adventure, patiently putting up with my mistakes, hoping for the best, step-by-step holding my hand and giving me cues about how to get the job done.

I'll share just one example about that. More than fifteen years ago, when I was a part-time teacher in New York, I ran into one of my students in the subway, just after the lecture ended. It was my first course in that school, very early in the semester, a course which I had not taught before, and I was using a mandatory textbook that I did not know very well. Looking over my shoulder, she saw me assigning grades in the papers which I had just collected: A, A-, A, A+, B+… With a soft voice and an enigmatic smile, she casually observed that I was marking too high. During the rest of the subway ride, I kept

thinking about it and realized that she was right: In my inexperience with the letter grade system, I had come close to shooting myself in the foot by setting wrong grade expectations for the class. There's no question that this student saved me from some future pain, perhaps even an uncomfortable visit to the Dean's office.

Why has this episode stuck in my memory? Remarkably, this student's only reason to help me calibrate my grades was her honest commitment to the sacred ritual of teaching and learning, even if alerting me about the problem meant that she would get a lower grade. I'll never forget it. Students can help us become better teachers.

So, my acknowledgments are not the *introduction* to this speech, a necessary formality before I get to the core of what I really wanted to say. No, my acknowledgments are the centerpiece of this speech:

Students help us become better teachers.

Colleagues help us become better teachers.

Family and friends help us become better teachers.

And if we dare to reflect about our past, we may realize that our own teachers, good or bad, alive or dead, also keep teaching us by example from the depths of our memories, forever reminding us what to do or what not to do.

Reflecting *what* we liked about our favorite elementary school teacher. Thinking back about why we did well—or didn't do well—in a given course. Recalling the excitement of a collaborative assignment or the anxiety of a final exam. Remembering anecdotes like the one I just told you about the student in the subway, and only then, many years later, realizing their importance. This is to say, establishing a constant dialogue among our many lives as students, as teachers, as parents. So much energy invested by so many people. So much learning.

We can look at all of these real experiences, past and present, all of this lived knowledge, as a formidable data bank, a gigantic bag of tricks to help us in the here and now of the classroom. Who knows, perhaps one day, when we are very old, this accumulated knowledge could hopefully become some sort of wisdom?

What is it, then, the secret? How could we harness this data bank, understand our strengths and weaknesses, and become gradually better? Perhaps all we need to do is to also assume ourselves as learners, and lifetime learners at that. Perhaps all it takes to slowly become a wiser teacher is to humbly admit that, no matter how many years we have been teaching, how much we may have mastered our discipline, still, the new group of students before us today represents a new challenge. These new students staring at us with big round eyes the very first day of classes bring with them a new set of minds and desires and fears, a new set of perspectives on how they see themselves and how they want to reshape the world. And, in all honesty, at that point we teachers become beginners all over again. Some days, we may have to mumble the scariest confession of all: "I don't know." And *that's* when we get to choose how we feel about it: Shall we choose to see the glass as tiredly half empty or as excitedly half full?

Now and then there are glorious days when I know exactly what I am doing in the classroom and everything goes according to plan, and there are tough days when I don't know what's going on and must work very hard to catch up. Most days are in between. What's for sure is that I am still learning, and I hope that I always continue learning.

The bar raised by our training and experience can also be a problem: Yes, we worked hard for that doctorate. And yes, we have been teaching

for a while and, by now, aren't we supposed to know what we are doing? Despite these expectations, I think that the key to keep improving as a teacher is to admit that we need help and that we will *always* need help, and to know that, provided we ask for it, help will be available, from students (new and old), from colleagues, from the institutions where we teach, from our friends and families, even from strangers whom we have never met, and whose thoughts we get to read in a computer screen. I got that kind of help in the past, as soon as I started teaching, and I have been so fortunate to continue getting it, every day. With so many opportunities to learn from one another and so much room for growth, teaching really is the most exhilarating ride one could have. It's hard work, but I am very grateful. My family, my teachers, my colleagues, my students: thank you for making it possible.

The Importance of Good Teaching: Teaching Relationships

by
Dr. Peter MacIntyre
Department of Psychology
Cape Breton University

It was something like 17 years ago when a then Vice President (now a University President) made a comment that has stayed with me. He was discussing the need for change and transition during a difficult budget process and he said that universities have not changed much in 350 years. His message was that change is overdue. Being both a faculty member and ethnically Scottish, my first reaction was to take a contrary position. If something lasts for 350 years, it most certainly is doing something right; there is a truly impressive legacy.

But as I thought about the dialectic between constancy and change at the university, the reasons for its longevity began to come into focus. I am old enough to remember that television was going to replace teachers in general, and professors in particular. And I am young enough to have heard that MOOCs will do the same. But neither has come to pass and I see no need to worry that either will – television has had its shot and some commentators on MOOCs are already declaring them to be "over". I must admit to having signed up for a MOOC - I enjoyed the video lectures I genuinely learned something. But statistically speaking, I am normal. By that I mean I stopped participating after a few weeks. I never did finish that course; likely I never will.

In contrast, thinking back on my days as a university student, I can say that barring illness, I attended every class of every course I took throughout university. So I started thinking about the difference between the two experiences and I keep coming back to the same conclusion. The difference between the television or MOOC delivery model, as compared to in-class learning, is not the information content, or the video demonstrations. It's not the expertness of the teacher and it's not because of the advances or limits of technology. The key difference is the way that the relationship between teacher and student develops.

Universities are places of constant change; both the research and teaching sides of the house guarantee as much. Research is inherently change-oriented. Teaching itself changes as faculty adapt to new generations of students, new course management systems, new technology for learning, advances in knowledge and new ideas. But at its core, the heart of the whole endeavour is the relationship between teacher and student. That is what has not changed in the past 350 years or more. Once you are somebody's student, you always are that person's student. That special relationship reflects the constancy that will keep universities at the foreground of teaching and learning at the highest levels. Human beings are born to learn, we do it voraciously until testing and grading and credentialing and tuition fees and rigid curricula get in the way. Through it all, if we can keep the relationship between teacher and student in focus such that the changes happening around that core serve the development of a teacher-student connection, then universities should be fine for another 350 years or more.

Every student is a unique individual, no matter where we as faculty meet them. If one considers the on campus and the virtual environments, faculty now interact with their students in more places than ever – in class, on the web, on Facebook, with Twitter, and whatever else will replace these tools. The best teaching practices are the ones that serve to connect us with students, the ones that genuinely facilitate the development of a relationship between persons, and respect the unique trajectory of the learners.

This is not simply a nice thing to say, it is a

course design issue. I would like to offer some practical suggestions for how to foster interpersonal connections, with a focus on the potentially difficult case of online learning. The ideas to follow are drawn from an online course in Positive Psychology. In the first week students pay tribute to someone who has passed on, a relative or even a celebrity who has affected them. They consider the person's life and how they lived their values, describing celebrities, leaders, and ordinary people (grandparents and war veterans, fathers and mothers) with extraordinary strength. Then the students write their own legacy statement, how they want to be remembered. They also introduce themselves to the class; they are not asked to name their year and program but they are asked to describe "you at your best" – an example of something they were proud to do, something that reflects their core values and character strengths. With these three techniques, I learn a lot about them as people: I know that Talia lives her Christian faith in everyday decisions; I know that Jennifer loves her dad more than anything and that she almost lost him three years ago when he had cancer; I learned that Sandra made a quilt for a blind woman with an inscription from the bible written in Braille – a gesture that brought them both to tears at the time and the rest of us as well when we watched the recording of the tribute posted to the web.

So it is quite possible to learn a lot about students online, to develop a relationship with each one that is personal and meaningful. The rest of the course continues to ask students to identify their core values, their 'signature strengths' and their sources of happiness in life. They conduct an experiment that pits fun against philanthropy and they write about it (philanthropy wins almost every time). Even as I speak to you today, this week their assignment will be to do a truly altruistic act for a friend, neighbour or even a stranger. Then they come online to describe whether true altruism **can** exist in the human psyche and whether or not they experienced it during the assignment. I offer them my view that the psychological term 'pro-social' behaviour is an impoverished concept unsuitable to the selfless acts of everyday men and women.

So with 350 years behind us and more ahead, I hope that all of us, students, faculty, and university leaders, will see ourselves as the caretakers of a valuable legacy. As we work to support and strengthen the ways in which faculty and students can learn from each other, in unique and individual ways, we will bring out the very best in the next generation and in ourselves as well. If we can facilitate those relationships then our various roles at the university will have a lasting legacy of our own.

The Importance of Good Teaching: Being the Change I Want to See in the World

by
Dr. Ann Braithwaite
Department of Diversity and Social Justice
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To begin, I would like to express my deep appreciation to the Association of Atlantic Universities for this award, and to the Faculty Development Office at UPEI—and Don Desserud and Gerald Wandio who helped me pull my file together on a very short timeline. I was completely thrilled when I got the letter in July, and I'm still thrilled today. To have one's work recognized, especially work that is so often invisible—as, strangely enough, the work of educational leadership is—is a great honour, and something to celebrate with others.

More than a feel-good bumper sticker (not actually said by Ghandi), and as clichéd as it can sound, "be the change you want to see in the world" captures my philosophy of educational leadership, as well as my sense of myself and my professional identity in the university. (It's also of course a poster on the door of my office). It's the short and pithy articulation of how I think educational leadership is about both modeling a way of being, a way of living a life, <u>and</u> working towards making desired and needed change happen in academia. It's an articulation of how I think about my role as a professor for students, and my role as a faculty colleague for other professors around me. It's a saying that guides how I think about my position in relation to education more broadly, and to the university specifically. In short, it's a powerful shorthand for what motivates me in this profession, and for how I want to motivate others.

When I think about educational leadership, I think about both how much I love, and how important I think, good conversation is—in the teaching we do, in the ways we talk about that teaching, and in the opportunities we create to enable that teaching. Reflecting on teaching obviously involves discussing what we do in the classroom—content, method, delivery, outcome—all the elements that make up our pedagogy and our pedagogical contemplations. Good conversation, though, also demands intellectual community: a space within which to have these conversations; other people—eager and enthusiastic—with whom to engage in this talk; an intellectual and political engagement with the world of ideas; a deep caring about the lives of those with whom we share the university, especially our students—who are the core reason we are here; and a shared commitment to ongoing self-reflection about "who we are and what we do" in this institution. None of these comes easily, amidst the day to day busy-ness of our academic lives, and yet, I believe passionately, they are/they must be what ultimately drives and sustains us in this profession. When I think about educational leadership, then, I think also of how important it is—to me—to devote the time and energy needed to create the possibilities for those conversations, to build the intellectual communities of which I want to be a part.

Intellectual community connotes a wide-ranging and varied set of possibilities. It is what happens (or what I want to happen) when we talk in hallways and over coffee and in each other's offices about what we're doing and what we could do, about student "ah-ha" moments in our classrooms, about ideas for new courses and curricular offerings; it is what happens (or what I want to happen) at conferences and symposia, on and off campus, when we put together panels and roundtables and workshops because we're excited to work with others and excited about the process of coming together to do that work; it is what happens (or what I want to happen) when we write (often with others) and edit and review and assess our own and each other's work and programs and curricula…. In short, it is what happens when we understand ourselves as

engaged in that constant and limitless conversation, and understand ourselves as part of a process of producing both knowledge and opportunities for that knowledge production together. A passion for, and commitment to, intellectual community insists on an ongoing and interactive process of producing and exchanging ideas, ideas that can make a difference in ways that we don't and cannot know beforehand, but that must be allowed to be articulated and debated and talked about—and that must remain clear to us all as the reason why we are a university in the first place. In the midst of my passion and enthusiasm, I increasingly worry that we are losing sight of this core understanding of the university--in the growing emphasis on instrumentalizing ideas and the knowledges they can produce.

Intellectual community, though, does not happen by itself. It needs to be fostered and nurtured in a variety of ways; it takes ongoing work to get it going and keep it going. It needs recognition and valorization as a process worth doing. It needs structures that enable it to occur and continue—i.e., changed policies, different institutional focuses, an academic context dedicated to ensuring that it can exist, and the shared belief that students will thrive in it. It needs an openness and willingness to take seriously its risks (perceived and real), and to be able to work with others to meet and address those. For those of us, though, who find the process of that ongoing conversation some of the most invigorating and exciting part of this profession, the work of producing intellectual community—its spaces, conversations, structures—is as rewarding as being a part of it. Its payback, for me, comes both in finding the people with whom to engage, and in seeing how the venues one has imagined and shaped to do this succeed in captivating other people too.

While there are no doubt a number of ways to work at producing the space of and for intellectual community, my own focus is always on identifying how I can bring people together to reassess what we do, together, in this profession. What kinds of programming do we offer—and what are the many ways we can package and offer those knowledges? What kinds of curricular possibilities do our current structures and policies constrict and even inhibit—and how can we alter those to increase opportunities for our students? Who are "we" —in my own field and program here or at other universities, in the Faculty of Arts more generally, and in universities today (especially given their massive changes and challenges)—and how can we articulate that in more accessible and exciting ways? And, most importantly, how can we bring all of this back to our classrooms, to our students, to excite them too about "who we are and what we do?"

Educational leadership, then, in its most complete sense, involves constantly asking questions, identifying and even challenging status quo arrangements, and doing the work, with others, to make change that highlights and strengthens the university's core mission—empowering students and colleagues to enhance and enable that unfettered exploration of ideas. I think I've succeeded best as an educational leader—both in and outside the classroom with students (my favorite part of this job), as well as with colleagues from many areas on my own and other campuses—when other people around me get as passionate and enthusiastic and even as loud as I am, when they take nothing for granted but think of their worlds as always open to possibility and change. I could not imagine my work in this profession without this intellectual community I work so hard to create—so I can both be and live as I imagine and desire, for myself and for others, in this profession. To be the change you want to see in the world can make the world one you want to be in—and that's both an exciting motivation and a model of leadership I want to embody.