

ASSOCIATION OF ATLANTIC UNIVERSITIES

Institutional Award Winners Retreat
Friday, October 21st, 2005
Nova Scotia Agricultural College
Truro, Nova Scotia

Faculty Development Bulletin

Fall 2005

Participants: Dr. Peter Williams (Acadia University), Dr. Harvey Johnstone (Cape Breton University), Dr. Stephen Coughlan (Dalhousie University), Ms. Kjellrun Hestekin (Memorial University of Newfoundland), Dr. Nancy F. Vogan (Mount Allison University), Dr. Charles Edmunds (Mount Saint Vincent University), Dr. Barbara Gill (University of New Brunswick), Dr. Allan Reid (University of New Brunswick), Prof. Kevin Sibley (Nova Scotia Agricultural College), Dr. Ann Braithwaite (University of Prince Edward Island), Dr. Angie Thompson (St. Francis Xavier University), Dr. Adam Sarty (Saint Mary's University), Dr. Ian Fraser (St. Thomas University)

Facilitators: Dr. Roger Moore (St. Thomas University)
Dr. Susan Drain (Mount Saint Vincent University)

Devotion to their profession kept fifteen faculty around the table despite sunshine which would have lured less committed individuals into the beautiful grounds of the Nova Scotia Agricultural College. They participated keenly in discussion which raised both familiar issues and novel questions: is there, for instance, a correlation between positive experience in high-school physics and the winning of institutional teaching awards?

Asked toward the end of the discussion what one point must not be omitted from a bulletin that reflected the afternoon's discussion, participants named two main areas: first, the mentoring of faculty, and second, the valuing of teaching in the processes of hiring, tenure, and promotion.

Seeking help and feedback on work in progress is an accepted part of the process of

research and publication, but it is less common for us to ask for help or feedback on our teaching. Even in institutions with strong faculty development programs, we feel the need for mentoring: when it works well, such a relationship is beneficial to both the novice and the experienced teacher. The dynamics of such relationships pose particular challenges: determining when the offer of help is actually helpful, and when it is interference or imposition, requires a degree of trust and tact that is unlikely to be developed by fiat. Thus, we are anxious that any mentoring system not be systematic, or at least, not overly formalized. Mentoring relationships should be encouraged, logically, at the departmental level, where the challenges of teaching in a particular field are familiar, and where discussion and mentoring of research may already take place.

However logical it may be to locate mentoring in the department, separating mentoring from assessment – the formative evaluation of the novices’ teaching from the summative evaluation of it – poses a challenge, for without that separation, it is hard to develop the trust which is necessary for the mentoring to work. Novices’ openness to critique or willingness to experiment and take risks in their teaching must not be turned to negative criticism in a file. Even when there is no paper trail, it may still be hard to maintain the trust required when the mentor has a say in the novice’s contract renewal, tenure hearing, or promotion application. For this reason, mentoring relationships outside the department may be a desirable option. It is not uncommon for recently appointed faculty to participate in formal or informal networks of new faculty, but we look for opportunities for new faculty to connect with experienced faculty outside their own departments.

We call for institutional support for the mentoring role, but we suggest that, for the most part, such support will be indirect: no one is proposing the establishment of an award for “Distinguished Mentor of the Year.” However, offices or committees of faculty development can build into their programmes the kind of opportunities we mention above: for example, workshops can be followed by email discussion groups where contacts may be followed up. Modest resources might be made available within or across departments for faculty to share materials or approaches. Such informal mentoring is more likely to have incremental rather than swift or dramatic benefits, but it will help develop a climate in which teaching

is a subject worthy of discussion and debate, not just in the abstract, but in concrete and everyday experience.

A good mentor is one who helps a novice identify and apply the unwritten or abstruse laws that govern the community, so that the novice may survive and come to thrive. In most of our universities, the cynics among us perceive that a good mentor would quickly dissuade the novice from anything more than minimal concern for teaching, since for the most part – even in institutions which do not describe themselves as research-intensive – it is through grant-getting, research and publication that novices will assure their career. We urge our colleagues to place more importance upon teaching in hiring and in tenure and promotion reviews. None of us would argue that research is overvalued; few would disagree that good researchers are often good teachers (and vice versa). However, hiring and tenure/promotion decisions do not reflect the importance that we think teaching has for the institution or for the profession. To rectify this imbalance requires action on a number of fronts: for example, we can have a say in the writing or revision of the articles in collective agreements which govern tenure and promotion; we certainly have a say in actual hiring and review decisions. We can demand thoughtful and thorough teaching portfolios of all our colleagues; we can expect teaching programmes as well as research programmes. We can pay our students the compliment of taking their evaluations seriously, and we can devise other forms of assessment to supplement student evaluations. We can contribute to the scholarship of teaching, and

respect and support our colleagues' efforts in this area.

Though mentoring and the valuing of teaching in the profession came top in our list of concerns, our discussion ranged through a number of issues. Some of these are perennials, and some reflect the changing reality of the university. We draw them to the attention of our colleagues in faculty development offices and committees, as issues that deserve further attention.

We are concerned about the demographics of our incoming students, their preparation, and their expectations: individual faculty can reach across the gap, but to narrow the gap requires more than individual effort.

We are all struggling with the challenges that large classes face: the difficulties of responding to written work, of ensuring skill development, and of engaging students in their own learning. We are prepared to believe that large classes can be made to work, but are less convinced that they can work well on these measures.

We find that the pressure to adopt new educational technologies often outstrips our opportunity or our capacity to assess them, or the degree of support provided for us to explore them.

We are concerned about our universities' reliance on part-time faculty. Hiring and assessment processes for part-time faculty are not as rigorous as those for full-time faculty, and the availability of qualified part-time faculty varies throughout the region. Part-time faculty enable us to get through the

programme, but we wonder whether the students' experience suffers.

We are in agreement that teaching is more than "getting through the programme"; our concern for promoting our students' learning expressed itself in a number of ways. We want to share with our students our love of our discipline – to remove barriers so that they can "rip into" the study. We want them to become independent of us. We want them to become critical thinkers (though we confess that there is considerable uncertainty among us and our colleagues as to what critical thinking really is and how it might be developed). We want to find the right balance between challenging and nurturing them. We want our students to experiment and to take risks, though many of them have already ventured resources they do not have to attend university, and are understandably cautious.

In these discussions, in other words, we recognize that idealism (though not fashionable) is alive in the professoriate, at least as represented by the university award winners gathered at the Teaching Retreat. We are idealists in that we are committed to two ideas: first, that teaching and learning are central to a university's mission, and second, that there is an unnecessary gap between what teaching and learning might be and what they more commonly are. Such idealism is not news to the presidents who attend the annual dinner of the AAU at which regional award winners are honoured, for they hear addresses every year from these individuals. Idealism is also evident in the annual teaching showcase sponsored by AAU. The Teaching Retreat offers another opportunity for us to

confess our passion, affirm our commitment, mentor one another, and resolve to continue “being the change we wish to see” in our institutions and in our profession. For this opportunity, we are all most grateful.

A Note on the Process:

This year’s retreat used writing to identify and focus the discussions; much of the writing is anonymous and thus individual opinions are not identified. The use of the first-person plural pronoun does not imply unanimity, though the writing and discussion revealed considerable consensus on concerns, though not necessarily on ways and means to address those concerns.

In keeping with the prevalent theme of mentoring, the new co-facilitator was ably supported and mentored by Roger Moore, who has set an exemplary standard not only in promoting but in reporting the discussion, and who has earned our respect and appreciation.

Respectfully submitted,

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