

## ASSOCIATION OF ATLANTIC UNIVERSITIES

Institutional Award Winners Retreat

Friday, October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007

Old Orchard Inn

*(Relocated from Acadia University)*

Wolfville, Nova Scotia

**Faculty Development Bulletin**

**Fall 2007**

Participants: Dr. Susan Brigham, Mount Saint Vincent University  
Dr. Shelagh Crooks, Saint Mary's University  
Dr. Gregg MacKinnon, Acadia University  
Dr. Peter O'Brien, Dalhousie University  
Professor Alex Pierce, Cape Breton University  
Dr. Nancy Pitts, Nova Scotia Agricultural College  
Dr. Louise Wasylkiw, Mt. Allison University  
Dr. Charlene Weaving, St. F. X. University

Facilitators: Dr. Robert Lapp (Mount Allison University)  
Dr. Stephen Coughlan (Dalhousie University)

### **Suggesting an Agenda**

In accordance with the practice which has developed in the past few years for the teaching retreat, Robert Lapp (who had chaired the session last year) assumed the role of mentor to Steve Coughlan. Robert took notes of the meeting, leaving Steve free to chair this year's session. In accordance with Robert's suggestion, Steve sent out questions to the retreat participants in advance, to give them a chance to think about some common issues.

In particular, the advance questions invited participants to think of what three or four short practical pieces of advice they would offer to new faculty members in their institution. Participants were also asked to think about what sort of training in teaching they had received (if any), at what stage that

had occurred, what was done in their faculty or institution to help train new professors as teachers, and what might be done in this regard. The general issues of whether good teachers are made or born and whether institutions adequately value good teaching were also adverted to.

### **Telling Stories of Teaching Awards**

The session began with each participant explaining some of the backgrounds surrounding her or his award. There were of course various differences between the awards, such as where they were presented (at Convocation, at a separate banquet or on some other occasion) or what the award consisted of (framed photographs or plaques on display, monetary prizes, public lectures, etc.). There were also notable commonalities. For example, alumni-sponsored awards

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were quite common. Further, although nominations could typically be made by a variety of people, in fact most of the winners had been nominated in large measure by their students.

### **How is Teaching Valued?**

This review of awards led to discussion of the value actually placed on teaching within universities. There were no strong disagreements among the discussants, but various strains of thought are worth distinguishing. On the one hand, there was a feeling that research was generally valued more highly than teaching by university administrators. This did not seem to reflect the attitude of other constituents of the university community: it was observed that it would be difficult to imagine an alumni research award! Although many of the award winners were at relatively early stages of their careers and felt that the award would assist with their tenure or promotion applications, there was a general feeling that the T&P process placed more value on research. Some participants had been led to feel at a certain degree of risk on the research portion of their application, though there was a general sense that only a very low threshold was actually required to be met on the teaching portion. This contrasted sharply with what some participants saw as the most valuable part of their contribution to their institutions: good teaching had a real chance of inspiring students and affecting their lives in a way that no publication was ever likely to have. On the other hand there was also a view that to place teaching and research in contradistinction was a false dichotomy. Teaching itself could be a source of research issues, some participants noted, and there

was also discussion of the apprenticeship model of teaching, where subject matter expertise was presumed and in a sense communicated directly to the student.

### **What is Good Teaching?**

Discussion of this issue revealed the entirely unsurprising fact that there are many differing good styles of teaching. Some participants unabashedly lectured, others tried to avoid it at all costs, while still others fell in the middle, happy to lecture at times but also willing to hand over control when that was appropriate. There was widespread agreement on the value of humour, especially when it could be directed against oneself without undermining the classroom dynamic. There was also consensus on the importance of having a good relationship with the class and the students in it, though there was clearly a wide variety of views on how to cultivate this and exactly what it constituted.

Participants had many different backgrounds before and during their university careers, ranging from prior teaching experience or some training during grad school to no specific training other than being inspired by individual teachers in their own past. No matter what their experience or teaching style, though, it appeared that all participants still felt a degree of nervousness before a class, but valued that feeling.

### **Advice for New Colleagues**

Participants put forward a number of specific suggestions that they felt would be valuable advice for anyone starting a career in university teaching, and which arose from the experience of doing so. These included:

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learning (or trying to learn) students' names so that they would feel more directly involved and see that making mistakes was acceptable; assigning one textbook but having a different one to help prepare from, in order to have other perspectives and a helpful source of examples; making personal contact with students through email or letters, either before the course begins or with a reflective letter afterward; negotiate the ground rules for the course with the students by giving out a draft syllabus at first, to give them some input into (and ownership over) the structure of the course or the marking scheme; deliberately breaking eye contact to encourage students to talk to one another, not the professor; being flexible enough to change material; showing respect for students by starting and ending on time; fully thinking out in advance and organizing any examples that will be used on the blackboard, and finally; always having a backup plan (or in other words, in what came to be the unofficial motto for the meeting, "when in doubt, suck a pipette!").

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**PARTICIPANTS:**

**Dr. Susan Brigham** – Faculty of Education, Mount Saint Vincent University

**Dr. Shelagh Crooks** – Department of Philosophy, Saint Mary's University

**Dr. Gregg MacKinnon** – School of Education, Acadia University

**Dr. Peter O'Brien** – Department of Classics, Dalhousie University

**Professor Alex Pierce** – Department of English, Cape Breton University

**Dr. Nancy Pitts** – Department of Environmental Sciences, Nova Scotia Agricultural College

**Dr. Louise Wasylkiw** – Department of Psychology, Mt. Allison University

**Dr. Charlene Weaving** – Department of Human Kinetics, St. Francis Xavier University