

ASSOCIATION OF ATLANTIC UNIVERSITIES

Institutional Award Winner's Retreat

Friday, October 17th, 2014

Cape Breton University

Sydney, Nova Scotia

Faculty Development Bulletin

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Participants: *Debbie Brennick, Department of Nursing, Cape Breton University; Emin Civi, Faculty of Business, University of New Brunswick; Amanda Cockshutt, Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry, Mount Allison University; Maryanne Fisher, Department of Psychology, Saint Mary's University; Eric Gill, Faculty of Engineering and Applied Science, Memorial; Amy MacFarlane, School of Business, University of Prince Edward Island; Anne-Marie Ryan, Department of Earth Sciences, Dalhousie University; Joanne Tompkins, Faculty of Education, St. Francis Xavier University*

Facilitators: David Creelman, Department of Humanities and Languages,
University of New Brunswick
Neil Maltby, Faculty of Business, St. Francis Xavier University

The Retreat Begins: Few places are more beautiful in October than Cape Breton, so even though the day was cool and a bit rainy, when ten professors, each recognized by their institutions for their strengths and abilities as teachers, met on October 17th, 2014, we did so in a collegial and positive frame of mind. During our ice-breaking activity we asked the professors to identify what they loved most about teaching, and perhaps it is not surprising that they identified as special those moments when students come alive and are transformed, in ways large and small, by their work. The moments which professors celebrated are captured in these three statements:

"The moment I am happiest with my teaching occurs when students are engaged in the material and excited to have mastered it."

"The moment I am happiest with my teaching occurs when students really feel comfortable, put themselves in that place of being really vulnerable, and 'let go' of long held beliefs... it's often a scary place but it can be such a place of learning."

"The moment I am happiest with my teaching occurs when I receive feedback from students that I helped them achieve their goals and/or made a difference in their academic experience."

We were reminded from the outset that teaching is a transformative experience for both the students and the teacher, and when our work in the classroom is at its best, individuals are changed for the good. However, the professors around the table were also aware that the conditions for learning are not always ideal.

When asked to identify “One Thing They Wish Could Change...” as a starting point for discussions, the participants focused our conversation around four main topics;

1. Repositioning teaching in our minds as a coequal to research
2. Getting students to think critically
3. Supporting the development of teachers in our region
4. Addressing the challenges of students

1) **Repositioning Teaching:** In order to create a university experience that is full and rich for students, committed instructors invest enormous amounts of time and energy in designing and delivering their courses. The benefits the students receive translate positively back to the campus as programs, departments, and universities grow and flourish. Given the importance, even the centrality, of excellent teaching to the university mission, the participants at the retreat started our discussions by asserting that *teaching always needs to be valued as coequal to research*. Indeed, the roles of teacher and researcher are interdependent as research informs and enriches teaching and we revitalize our teaching through research.

Of course, the group recognized that repositioning how teaching is valued is complicated. First of all, some institutions have a tradition of viewing teaching as a secondary pursuit. Our discussion addressed widely held views that teaching is considered, particularly by hiring, tenure, and assessment committees, as of secondary importance to research. The first step toward change is, of course, to ensure that new faculty members are committed and effective teachers. With an eye toward advancing that goal, the group concluded that every faculty search committee, charged with

vetting 'normal' tenure track positions (i.e. not research chairs), should pay as much attention to teaching desire and ability as it does to research. For teachers already within the institution, the tenure process should be weighted at least as much toward teaching excellence as it is toward research. In some cases, universities are faced with the challenge of employing faculty with little interest in teaching and less ability. Many faculty come with little formal experience in the field of education. It was generally felt that both hiring and promotion committees need to have ‘teeth’ to encourage and ensure quality teaching. While recognizing that different faculties and unions around the region view this question in different ways, the retreat participants noted that teaching portfolios, peer-assessments, and student opinion surveys need increasingly to be a welcomed, and maybe at some point a required, part of the assessment and promotion process.

Retreat participants all noted, that their own journey as excellent teachers has depended on the friendship, assistance, and mentorship of other top teachers at our universities and the wider academic community. Teaching is not a solitary art; teaching is a communal activity. To this end the participants reflected on how teaching can be fostered and supported. We noted that institutional support for faculty development is essential to promote ongoing attention to teaching. Not all the universities in the region have active Teaching and Learning Centres, and the professors who are without them noted how hard that can be. A discussion was held regarding the coordination of AAU teaching centre resources to promote and implement effective teaching across the region. Many resources could be shared and made available online. Realistically it may be

teaching-friendly faculty who pursue this while others who care less that ignore these opportunities. The job of fostering and encouraging the keeners certainly falls to the administration. There was general endorsement that “teaching friendly” administrators should retain teaching responsibilities to keep them “grounded,” and we noted that those administrators who foster strong teaching cultures should themselves be recognized for their efforts.

2) Fostering Critical Thinking: As we turned from issue of fostering excellent teaching, to how those teachers actually engage with students, we focused on the wide need across all our campuses to encourage students to think critically. Our discussion addressed both teachers and students; that is, that we should really value teaching that challenges students to think critically and not simply pay lip service to good teaching. Scholarly evidence and our own experience confirm that students genuinely engage when given the chance to think critically. Universities need to ensure a culture of learning excellence (teaching excellence when learning is foremost) rather than a culture of student comfort or teaching competence.

Retreat participants noted that in their faculties’ students did not engage regularly in critical thinking and wondered if it is because:

- Faculty don’t expect it or incorporate opportunities for critical thinking in the class, or
- Students don’t value it. Some discussion was held that the “collectivity” of millennials doesn’t challenge the authority of academics

As examples of initiatives that encourage critical thinking, we discussed the

learning communities of the USA and the interdisciplinary colloquia of Saint Mary’s and St. Francis Xavier universities. Further, it was felt team-based discussions and projects take students out of their comfort zone and encourage critical thinking.

3) Supporting Educational Development: Supporting the development of teachers in our region was discussed at some length. Initially, we debated whether teaching certification should be expected of all new hires, and we had a very interesting time comparing the different certification programs which are available (or not) on our various campuses. Gradually, the discussion shifted to offering teaching development via the coordination of various resources at the Atlantic schools so small schools are not disadvantaged.

4) Addressing the Challenges of Students: The final topic of our discussion involved the ongoing challenge of balancing the desire for upholding standards in courses with the need to accommodate some students for a variety of reasons. Addressing cultural norms regarding learning, language, learning styles, and students requiring accessible learning support in the classroom invite professors to change and customize approaches to learning. Yet, these opportunities challenge the delivery of consistent expectations about a course. Our discussion led to questions such as “is accommodation a way of going on different paths to the same goal?” and “how do we teach to diverse classrooms?” Ultimately, we questioned if accommodation supports or detracts from the opportunity for engagement in an authentic learning experience with the challenge of crossing a threshold of discovery and deep learning. The growing movement toward to principles of

Universal Course Design was noted, though we also admitted that the implementation of these kinds of programs across the region is pretty uneven.

Some Closing Thoughts: At the end of our discussions all of participants wrote, using a dozen words (or so), the essential message they would like to send to their home universities. In our minds we were imagining our various presidents as our audience, but the statements which emerged really speak about the

experience and desires of committed teachers across the AAU:

The sustainability of universities depends upon returning to a culture of teaching and learning excellence.

Excellence in teaching needs to be central, articulated, supported, and well-resourced.

Treasure us; support the strong, encourage the struggling, and value this art!