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Awards for Excellence in Teaching

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**Presentations to the
Atlantic University Presidents**

**by the recipients of the
2003 Association of Atlantic Universities**

Distinguished Teacher Award

Robert Lapp
Department of English
Mount Allison University

James Stolzman
Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology
Dalhousie University

Instructional Leadership Award

Susan Drain
Department of English
Mount Saint Vincent University

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The Importance of Good Teaching

by

Dr. Robert Lapp

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Let me begin by saying what an honour it is to receive this award. I feel very fortunate to be in a profession where I can be recognized for what I most enjoy doing. Perhaps I should also say I feel fortunate to be *at this point* in the history of our profession, because teaching has not always been accorded such honours, and that is perhaps why we are still asked to ponder the question “what is the importance of good teaching?” Surely at some future AAU Council meeting the answer to this question will be so self-evident as to warrant the topic “How can we make our (universally) good teaching even better?” For by then, we would all like to hope, good teaching will have been so fostered, encouraged, and sustained in every area of the university curriculum that its importance will be taken for granted, if for no other reason than because it constitutes a basic fulfilment of our contract with our students who pay to be taught well. First and foremost, then, good teaching is important because it is our collective duty.

And yet, one reason we continue to ponder its importance is that the *nature* of good teaching is so difficult to define conclusively, to restrict to any one formula. There are many ways to teach well, often determined by context or discipline. Last fall, for example, an upper-level Commerce course was scheduled in the classroom immediately following my Introduction to Poetry survey. Now, this class had been organized into energetic Learning Teams that towards the end of the term were required to put on group marketing presentations. Each day, as I packed up my books and papers, I would marvel at the way these teams of students would arrive early to class, dressed to the “nines” in sharp business attire, how they would swiftly deploy their Power Point equipment and begin to distribute crisply-produced handouts—documents worthy of any high-end marketing company. As day after day went by, with each group showing evidence of the same level of creative investment in the success of their presentations, I began to seriously envy the skill with which the professor had motivated her students to such efficiency and focus. And, while her example did inspire me to think of ways I might create similar effects, I finally had to realize that

perhaps my skills lay in other forms of motivation and modelling. There are many different kinds of good teaching!

For this reason, our sense of its importance will often take on individual colouring as well. Let me proceed by offering a couple of personal reflections on this question, and then, in the time remaining, venture two more general perspectives.

First, it was to me something of a mild irony that I received notice of this award just as I was turning away from teaching—for a year—to take up my first sabbatical. And yet this circumstance has had the benefit of throwing into bold relief what I miss most about teaching, what its importance is in my own life. What this boils down to, I have decided, is the human relationships it offers. For example, I missed the pleasure of crafting reading lists and learning paths that I hoped would seize the imaginations of my prospective students on the first day and turn their skepticism and reserve to fascination and excitement. I missed the opportunity to meet 35 or so of those first-year students tramping noisily around campus at orientation—to meet them on the first day of classes and put a new face on literary studies, perhaps to alter any misconceptions they might have about what an “English Prof” is like, to receive the raw material of their writing skills and begin to help shape it into something more articulate and forceful. And I especially miss the chance to meet again the students I have taught over the last three years, who are this year’s Honours students, whose careers through literary studies I have followed with interest, and who will have left Mount Allison by the time I return to the classroom next fall. In short, I miss the human relationships established by the art of “e-ducing” or of “leading-out,” a form of connection as ancient as human culture and endlessly renewed in each “teaching moment” made possible by our institutions of higher learning. And it is a relationship, I would hasten to assert, that cannot be re-created in cyberspace: it requires presence and immediacy, the theatre of human action and reaction, the chemistry of *ex tempore* exchange.

A second personal sense of the importance of teaching comes from the realization that it was it only through the example of mentors and role-models in the art of teaching that I have found my way to where I am now. That is, good teaching produces teachers, and not just in the narrow sense of cloning academics, but in the wider sense of sending forth leaders and care-givers and educators of all kinds. I was privileged to grow up the son of a United Church minister who, among other things, was a superb preacher. Sunday after Sunday, I absorbed from him the art of effective communication: how to make complex ideas apprehensible to a wide range of learning styles, how to select—and deliver---effective and colourful illustrations, how to give something of the intrigue of narrative to an argument. Then, too, I was lucky enough to experience Grade Thirteen in Ontario, where I came under the influence of an English teacher who managed to create in me such excitement for the study of Canadian Literature that I abandoned my plans to pursue Cartography as a career and instead ended up in English at U of T. And there I encountered a long list of “distinguished teachers,” one of whom stirred my fascination for Romantic literature, another who opened my eyes to the pleasures of research, another who demonstrated the pedagogical value of performing literary texts aloud—the list goes on. These are people whose teaching changed my life and brought me, through their mentoring, role-modelling, and practical support, to this podium tonight.

So: good teaching is important as a re-enactment of one the most basic of human relationships, and for the way it perpetuates the values inherent in this relationship by inspiring new generations of educators. Put now in somewhat more general terms, good teaching opens minds and creates aspirations. In the time I have left, let me develop these last two ideas a little further.

First, then, good teaching opens minds. In the most practical terms, this operates at the basic level of the teaching environment, leaving aside the more discipline-specific level of course content. Imagine being a first-year student at one of our universities, on the first day of classes, fresh from the Bacchanalian excesses of orientation, mind spinning from MSN and MTV and possibly other cybernetic substances, full of preconceptions of what university professors are like from low-budget Hollywood comedies, and at the same time anxious to succeed at any cost so as not to waste Mom and

Dad’s thousands of dollars. Amidst all this, how open would your mind be? —especially once you had squeezed yourself into that tiny tablet desk at the back of the generic, fluorescent, rather chalky-smelling classroom, with all the desks facing towards that ominous lectern at the front? Using the old analogy of the mind as a radio receiver, one could say that all these factors would amount to a bad case of static, a mind-clenching white noise interfering with your reception of whatever programme was on offer. So that is why, at the level of pedagogical technique and innovation, I have focussed most of my energy on ways to reduce this static and create the conditions in which students can find their own dial and get tuned to the right frequency. Or, using a different analogy, I see my first task as that of leading the students in some kind of figurative deep-breathing exercise, helping them to get appropriately relaxed and centred, so that their minds can dilate, their doors of perception swing open, and their native capacity to think and express themselves be fully released.

And in my experience, finally, one of the most important things to flow into an open mind is the desire to learn, which in turn leads to even larger, self-motivating desires and aspirations. I’ll never forget the day I was told, in a U of T Romantics class, that Samuel Taylor Coleridge was the last person in Western culture to have read everything that was important to read. Now, this was a deliberately polemical statement, meant to establish the phenomenon of Coleridge’s prodigious reading, and the fact of his position at a turning-point in cultural history when the publishing industry expanded exponentially and forever put out of reach the possibility of reading everything. But it was the instructor’s excitement with this idea that was infectious, partly inspired by the fact (as we found out later) that he was learning the material of the course alongside us, having been seconded at the last minute from the Renaissance department to fill in for a sabbaticant on leave. But it was his enthusiasm that was precisely the ingredient needed to open my mind at the moment to the import of this idea, and into that space immediately flowed the desire to read everything that Coleridge *himself* had ever written. Out of that (admittedly unique) aspiration, I became a determined reader of literature, and from that in turn emerged the desire to create teaching moments such as the one he had created for me. And now for me, among the most fulfilling moments as an instructor are those when an upper-level student will approach me somewhat

shyly to ask “What exactly is involved in becoming a English professor?” Now again, let me hasten to assert that my aim as a teacher is not simply to clone myself, or to produce more English professors (though that would be nice!), but rather it is to create the experience of aspiration to something larger than oneself, a sense of opening and possibility that students can then transfer to whatever direction their own talents and learning paths take them in.

So yes, good teaching is important for all these reasons. It fulfills our basic contract with the students; its offers a human relationship that resonates throughout the ages; it opens minds and creates the aspiration to grow beyond oneself. And for me, personally, it has made possible this unique opportunity to share an evening with you in this beautiful resort, for which I am both very grateful and deeply honoured.

Some Lessons about Teaching I am in the Process of Learning

by

Dr. James Stolzman

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I considered several avenues by which I might approach the designated subject, The Importance of Teaching. In the end I decided to use this occasion as an opportunity to reflect on how my own teaching practices have changed since I began my academic career at Dalhousie (and King's) in 1970. Thus the title of my remarks this evening is "Some Lessons about Teaching I am in the Process of Learning."

Having adopted this theme, I set about to identify what I considered to be significant lessons in my evolution as a teacher. The initial list contained many possibilities. Since I was going to be addressing university presidents, I knew my audience would understand the necessity for cutbacks so I pared the list to the seven lessons enumerated below.

Lesson # 1. When designing and conducting classes I try to remember what it was like to be an undergraduate student who is blissfully ignorant of the esoteric knowledge one acquires in graduate school.

The very first class I taught at Dalhousie in 1970 the required reading consisted of 12 books. As a sociologist, I should have anticipated that the students responded to my excessive demands in precisely the same fashion that factory workers resist speed-ups on assembly lines—which is to say they resist by getting creative and cooperative. After the course was over I found out that the students had formed teams, each of which was responsible for producing summaries of three of the assigned texts; these synopses were then exchanged for those of the nine unread books. Looking back, it is striking to me that many of the twelve books I assigned that first year were unsuitable for second year undergraduates. Several of them were by authors I had come to admire as a graduate student. Many of these works dealt with intellectual controversies that fired my imagination in graduate seminars and coffeehouse post-mortems. What I failed to grasp was that these authors and debates were utterly foreign to me as an undergraduate, as they probably were to

most students in that first class I taught. Good teachers know what, when, and how much their students are ready to learn.

Lesson # 2. I have found that while thorough preparation is essential to teaching and learning, excessive preparation is often counterproductive.

In that first class I just alluded to, I wrote out the text of my first few lectures (including even the jokes, anecdotes, and personal asides) word for word. I suspect you will not be surprised to learn that this method did not generate a lot of spontaneity or serendipity in the classroom. As I gained confidence as a teacher I came to realize that leaving spaces and loose ends in the material one presents is often a very healthy tension. I was reminded of this lesson just last week. I am teaching a new "capstone class" where students do volunteer work in the community during the second term of the class. They will also be expected to produce a 20 to 25 page paper relating ideas and information from their study of sociology and social anthropology to this practicum experience. Two or three weeks into the term it began to dawn on me that I really did not have a clear notion of what this final paper would entail. I initially felt this lack of clarity was a terrible dereliction of duty on my part. What is more, I strongly suspected that I had transmitted my confusion to the students so I asked them to write a few paragraphs about what they thought was expected of them in this assignment. This exercise generated a very fruitful discussion. Indeed, a number of the students made a point of praising me for including them in the process of working through this muddle. Though I think it was unearned, I nevertheless took full credit for this felicitous outcome in the belief that "luck is the residue of design."

Lesson # 3. Excellent, average, and below average students alike deserve my best effort as an educator.

The easiest thing in the world for teachers to do,

wittingly or unwittingly, is to orient their classes to the best students and hope that the benefits somehow trickle down to their classmates blessed with less academic ability. There is no question that elite students are a joy to teach and witnessing their proficiency with challenging course material can be extremely gratifying. However, I try to remind myself from time to time that all students pay the same fees and they are thereby equally entitled to the best educational experience we can provide. Whether it is choosing readings, crafting course assignments, or preparing exam questions I try to target all levels of the ability spectrum more or less evenly.

Lesson # 4. My students learn more effectively if I make an effort to connect with them on a personal level.

Increased enrolments have made it more difficult to make this connection, but it is easy to overestimate the obstacles. I make it a point to learn my students' names, even in relatively large classes. I also administer questionnaires the first day of class to obtain some basic information about them. I have had colleagues suggest that this is just a gimmick to curry favor and gain popularity. It is certainly true that students like it and like us when we know their names, but this is surely not the reason one should do it. Treating students as nameless objects is simply poor pedagogy. Students perform better in our classes if we know them and display evidence that we care about them as individuals.

Lesson # 5. Helping my students acquire and develop transferable skills is probably as important to their future success as the subject matter of the classes I teach.

When I was young professor I perceived no contradiction between teaching my students sociology and preparing them to be citizens and/or members of the workforce. Like most academics I subscribed to the liberal arts model of undergraduate education. This model calls for students to first acquire a solid foundation in a range of arts and science subjects before specializing in the study of one or two disciplines in subsequent years. This approach assumes that students learn and develop important transferable skills (e.g., writing, critical thinking, problem solving, oral communication) in the process of becoming simultaneously well rounded and at least minimally

competent in their major subject. I have long admired this view of university education and I believe it has generally served most of our students well. However, the environment within which university teachers operate has undergone substantial change in recent years and I have increasingly begun to wonder whether this model still delivers the assumed benefits outlined above. For most undergraduates the transferable skills portion of the liberal arts equation is probably more vital to their post-university prospects than the substantive knowledge they gain of their major subject. To the wider world these general skills represent the traditional hallmarks of an educated person. My own sense is that the liberal arts model still works as it was meant to for the top half of our students, but the same cannot be said for those in the bottom half. More specifically, I have observed that their degree of competence with respect to these very skills may be what most differentiates the two categories of students. My growing concern and mindfulness about this issue has led me to put much more emphasis on cultivating transferable skills in my classes.

Lesson # 6. I am suspicious of “one size fits all” methods of instruction and evaluation.

All too often reliance on a single, usually traditional, method turns out to be one at which we (i.e., instructors) excelled when we were on the other side of the lectern. I have gradually come to the realization that instructors need to acknowledge and respect individual differences in our students' learning styles. Using a variety of instructional formats and methods of evaluation makes it possible for greater numbers and different types of students to shine in our classes.

Lesson #7. Whenever possible and appropriate, I try to enlist students as teachers or tutors.

As a child growing up in rural North Dakota my dad attended a one-room school. Although the numbers involved are obviously small, I understand that graduates of such schools have historically displayed remarkably high levels of academic achievement. This makes perfect sense to me as an educator. In one-room schools older students continually revisit the lessons learned in the lower grades by tutoring the younger children. We all know that the responsibility of teaching something almost inevitably deepens one's understanding of that subject well beyond what is attained by the

usual modes of passive learning. I thus believe it is a very good idea to give students in our classes opportunities to teach concepts or other class material to their classmates. Our Department of Psychology at Dalhousie goes so far as to give academic instruction and credit to senior students who serve as tutorial leaders for their large introductory class. (Note to university administrators: this is not only good pedagogy, it is incredibly cost effective). On a related point, I try to treat my own teaching assistants as apprentices by giving them chances to lecture, lead discussions, design assignments, etc. Our graduate students are the university teachers of tomorrow. Simply handing T.A.s stacks of papers or exams to mark by a specified date is surely not a recipe for inspiring them to become excellent teachers.

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I would like to conclude by thanking a number of people who, in various ways, helped make this

award happen. First of all, I want to thank every single one of my many wonderful teachers, from Grade 1 onward. Secondly, I want to salute all my Dalhousie SOSA students. Their idealism and desire to make the world a more caring place help to keep me young and make this way of earning a living an absolute joy. Next, I want to thank my Dalhousie colleagues, especially those who have taken the time and trouble to write letters in support of my nomination for this award. There are also a number of support staff and administrators at Dalhousie who I have always been able to count on as a teacher. I would certainly be remiss if I failed to thank my wife, Willa who is with me this evening. Though she frequently (and legitimately) questions how I choose to use my time, Willa has never once in twenty years of marriage suggested that I put too much time or effort into my teaching. Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to the A.A.U. Thank you for honoring teaching. And thank you for honoring me.

Rewriting the University

by

Dr. Susan Drain

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Thank you for this award: it is a singular honour, and I am both proud and humble to be in the company of my colleagues Dr. Stolzman and Dr. Lapp. It is a singular honour, I said, but that is surely an odd term for such a plural enterprise.

I know of no other such collective project as these AAU awards: so many institutions with different histories, different characters, and sometimes (it seems) with different agendas, yet they collaborate to celebrate learning and teaching. I salute the Association of Atlantic Universities.

The awards are a plural enterprise, and the project they recognize is also a plural enterprise. Teachers, even excellent ones, need learners, and instructional leaders need, not followers precisely, but collaborators. An instructional leader does what all who care about university teaching and learning do: we discuss values and argue priorities, we trade strategies and we appropriate methods, and above all, we share stories – the cautionary tales, the horror stories, and the successes. Excellent teachers labour in fruitful vineyards, and great is the reward thereof. Instructional leaders are, by definition, I think, rather like Moses. Let it not be said that I claim to have the ear of the Almighty, or that a handy ten-point checklist is my answer to all pedagogical perplexities. Still, those individuals I have known whom I would call instructional leaders, are rather like Moses – passionately convinced that to stay put is to die, that to move out into the wilderness is the only way to claim what one has been promised, that uncertainty is the only wisdom, and that we are in this together. They chivvy and they nag and they lambaste their fellows on the journey; they try and they fail and they try again. And they never reach the promised land, though they are given a glimpse of it.

My university nominated me for an award in instructional leadership largely because I am responsible for a writing programme, but I refuse to be responsible for students' writing. Writing is too important to hand over to writing teachers alone,

high though my opinion of writing teachers is.

The other day I was reading an in-house publication of Capital Health – that's the authority which provides hospital services in the Halifax region. "Changing the way we think about health" is their slogan, and the gist of the message is that our health is too important to leave entirely to the health professionals: our health is our individual and our community responsibility. We ought not to take our health for granted, for our health enables productive, enjoyable lives; nor ought we to turn it over, uncritically or helplessly to the professionals.

"Changing the way we think about writing" could be the slogan of those from whom I have learned most about writing in the university. Writing is to university study as health is to productive, enjoyable lives: every member of the university community employs it, every member of the university community depends upon its vigour and its usefulness, and every member shares the responsibility for its development and discipline, especially among those who are new to the academy.

For all the emphasis on individual responsibility and community health, health professionals do not expect to be out of a job very soon. Nor do those of us who study and teach writing. Many of you in the university want us on call, like public health nurses, to inoculate against usage pox, spelling measles, and grammar mumps, until we finally eradicate such plagues from finished texts and first drafts alike. We are less like public health nurses than like epidemiologists, however, attentive to the patterns of usage, keen to distinguish the significant from the idiopathic, observant of outbreaks or breakdowns, critical of cause and effect.

Writing folks hate to be asked at parties what they do; questioners often recoil, or retreat, for fear that we'll correct their grammar. How ever did it come to be that those of us who trace our intellectual pedigree to Aristotle and Cicero are dwindled in most people's eyes to punctuation police and comma splice cops? It's a long story, and a

complex one, and I will oversimplify it. Whenever access to higher education is broadened, the code of correctness in English becomes more constrictive. It happened in the late nineteenth century in the United States -- and freshman composition was invented; it happened thirty years ago in this country, and writing proficiency tests and use of English exams proliferated. "Correctness" bears the same relation to the discourses of enquiry, however, as rolling bandages does to healthy living.

I didn't always see this, and I've done my share of rolling bandages. But let me tell you a story. I am a first-generation university student; I was lucky to grow up in a family sensitive to language. My father is British, my mother Canadian; they chose to raise their children in Canada, so that our opportunities wouldn't be limited by our accents. I learned to love language from one grandfather who read the dictionary while he smoked his evening pipe ("The story's not much," he liked to quip, "but the words are great") and I learned to respect language from my other grandfather -- the one who rescued his screwdrivers and planes and hammers from what was left of his house after the Luftwaffe flew over London in the first night raids. Those tools hung on pegs in his toolshed -- their wooden handles smooth and dark with much handling, their metal parts glistening with oil. They had their proper uses. I learned early that to use a screwdriver to open a paint can not only damaged the screwdriver, but was an affront to the tool and to the toolmaker. When I hear someone use "disinterested" for "uninterested", I feel the way I would if someone took a screwdriver out of my toolbox and used it as a chisel. Both are made blunt and clumsy by the misuse; I mourn both the damage and the affront.

It is easy, if you are a gatekeeper in the halls of privilege, to turn knowledge of the difference between "disinterested" and "uninterested" into a password, self-evident to the initiated, but arbitrary to those who have not learned the difficult play that is language for learning.

But I was lucky, as I said. I took to university discourse like a chameleon to camouflage, and slipped past even the stuffiest of language gatekeepers. Knowing and using the language of academic enquiry was not really protective colouring, though, -- and in the seventies it was not enough to hide the fact that I was a woman seeking an academic career. And though kindly mentors urged me to use my initials rather than my first name, and though they said encouragingly of me that I thought and wrote like a man, that fact of gender kept me from feeling too comfortably at home in the halls of academic privilege. That was lucky too.

I ask my students sometimes -- if language is a web, are you a spider or a fly? For I see them struggling in language, resenting the discipline its structures give to thought. I am grieved by how many say -- oh a fly, I'm a fly in the web of language.

It is easy to blame our schools. Or our video culture. It's harder, it seems, to acknowledge that university discourse requires different competencies than even highly competent high school students can develop. It is our responsibility to teach to those competencies in such specially designed "transition" courses as University 1101.

It is our responsibility to teach to those competencies in writing classes, where respect for language and passion for its possibilities persist, despite the frequency with which our colleagues who teach writing are marginalised in part-time appointments and service ghettos.

It is our responsibility to teach to those competencies in every class and course where students learn the discourse and the discipline that will empower them in the academy, that will help them change the academy -- and even, I say, straining like Moses to see where I will not go -- that will help them change the world.