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Awards for Excellence in Teaching

2004

**Presentations to the
Atlantic University Presidents**

**by the recipients of the
2004 Association of Atlantic Universities**

Distinguished Teacher Award

Dr. Shirin Haque
Department of Physics
University of the West Indies

Dr. Janet Hill
Department of English
Saint Mary's University

Instructional Leadership Award

Prof. Jean Guthrie
Department of English
Memorial University of Newfoundland

The Importance of Good Teaching

by

Dr. Shirin Haque

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Can we ever teach anyone to think? Teach them to question, to be skeptical, to have an original thought? Like Einstein did, when he wondered what would it be like to travel on a beam of light (which by the way, no Physics student I have taught to date has admitted to ever thinking that!) Can we teach a person to get excited and passionate about something?

The key to successful learning lies in the ability to get passionate about a subject material - to get passionate means to be fascinated, and to be fascinated is to question and to think. So can we teach people to think? - yes, we can - if we can get them excited and interested enough about any topic.

What then is the real role of a university teacher in the 21st century? Is it enough to spit out text book material? What differentiates a teacher from all kinds of fancy techie ways of teaching available now? What is the difference between e-learning, book learning and a human teacher. Exactly that - the human element.

Humans crave humanness, it is an innate characteristic in us - it is that to which we are drawn, as learners and remains the best of the best of that which is available still, like story telling or sense making. Learning takes place on two levels: on the intellectual and the emotional level - cognitive and affective states - one without the other is just not enough for effective learning to take place. And humans have the edge over computers when it comes to the affective arousal. You can connect with a human like you just can't quite with a computer or video.

I once threw out a question to my class on special relativity - I told them, I want you guys to toss and turn in bed tonight and lose sleep over thinking about the question "is there any experiment I can do to determine whether I am moving at constant velocity" --- imagine my delight, when email responses rolled in at 2:30 am in the morning when these same students had another 8 am class the next morning with me! They struggled into class sleepy eyed!

Who would have thought that simple gimmicks like "brownie of the week" question and your name being put on the 'gedanken honour roll' would act as motivators, at the university level to cause people to think - bringing to life, my favourite words of wisdom from Winnie the Pooh "think, think, think". So how do you get people to become passionate about something?

Douglas Adams said that the answer to life, the universe and everything was 42 - of course it turned out that no one ever knew what the question was. But I can tell you the secret to life, the universe and everything - it too begins with F and is only a simple 3-letter word - and that is

F-U-N

This was a common theme I found among many successful thinkers, and teachers I interacted with - the 'fun factor' - "it is adventurous and all great fun" are the words my professor from University of Virginia wrote in the preface of his astronomy text. No human being can excel over and above average in anything unless they enjoy what it is that they do, for enthusiasm is the fuel of success in everything.

So to create fascination, awe and wonder - is to awaken the child in us, to awaken the explorer instinct - like the 7 year olds bombarding me with the toughest questions at a public telescope viewing of mars. These kids knew no fear. Can't say the same for myself at the time! Really, how do you answer the question, "what would happen on the other side of earth if a giant meteor crashed into earth on one side?" hmmm...

3 people can move a mountain - CARINA - Caribbean Institute of Astronomy is witness to that - we started the first ever star parties and astrocamps in Trinidad taking the excitement of the heavens to the public - the events were sold out within 2 days...telling you that the Caribbean nations are hungry for guidance and knowledge but there are few to provide it.

The actual transmitting of the knowledge is one of the lower-order operation of a teacher teaching!

As important, if not more, is helping students hold on to their dreams through adversity. Sometimes all we need to truly excel is for someone to silently have faith in us on the side, and sometimes we are the only source of encouragement available to them.

Learning at a higher level has more to do with asking the right questions than getting the answers right. Counterintuitive as it may sound, often asking the right question is harder than finding the right answer! History has shown that great breakthroughs come from asking the right questions. My students chew on bite sized simple questions in class that they themselves work up to the big answer. True pleasure is really in the discovery and not as much as in the knowing.

Even as hurricane Ivan stormed its way through the Caribbean - a force to be reckoned with, I saw my friends and students develop a fascination for hurricanes. It was almost a game - they were following the trajectory with an enthusiasm of a professional and making predictions. What I saw, was that learning was taking place and they did not even realise it! Interest had been aroused, which is imperative for us as teachers when we teach.

Our students in Trinidad, a third world nation, do not enjoy many of the advantages and opportunities of their peers in the developed countries. Our greatest loss as a country is that we often lose the best minds to the already developed nations: the great brain - drain. As teachers, we are torn between helping students decide what is best for them versus what is best for the nation. The choice will always be theirs. But, ever so often, many do choose to remain right here, roll up their sleeves and toil right here to build our country towards becoming a developed nation.

Why do our students come for higher education? Is it really for the learning...or is it the learning without the I ... earning? Schooling is viewed mostly as a torturous process of memorization and passing exams so that the earning potential can be increased...I want to be in the business of increasing the learning potential, which requires a real turnaround in attitude to education from one of pain to a joyous one.

I would like to commend my University of the West Indies, St Augustine campus and the principal, Dr.

Bhoendradatt Tewarie for his renewed vision to be student centred and to work towards making it an institution of international standing. We need to create a society of learners that can work to make the Caribbean region competitive on the global market intellectually. A developed nation is an educated nation.

The process may be slow but the journey has begun. One of the ways, has been its recognition of the importance of teaching and learning approaches. This is very recent on our campus and clearly a step in the right direction towards undoing the damage of centuries of robotizing the human mind. The guys at the Instructional Development unit at our campus need mentioning for the culture change they are affecting at a rapid pace by the work that they are doing - Ms. Betty Rohlehr, Dr. Anna May Edwards - we are here because of you.

I am a teacher without training - all I can lay claim to is a passion for the subject material and a love for my students. I am humbly honoured to be the recipient of this 'distinguished teacher award' - thank you.

We are all academics - researchers and teachers inextricably rolled into one -The research we do, touches the students' lives nowhere as emphatically as the teaching does. Teaching is not just standing in front of a class with our laser pointer or marking hundreds of examinations but more often than not we are thrown into the role of the mentor. Who has not experienced the 'lost' student with a dream who needed a guiding light in the darkness and had no one to turn to - It is teaching, that failure is not lasting, but sometimes just a little bump along the winding road of life. It is about building their self confidence and showing them that great scientists made many blunders too. It is knowing that the pain passes but the beauty remains and that the greatest thing in life is to keep your mind young and never stop learning.

Excitement is self perpetuating because it is intrinsically rewarding. My biggest hope is that I can ignite in a student a spark for learning, that becomes self sustaining. Basic behavioral psychology will tell you that a person is inclined to repeat experiences that are pleasant - positive reinforcement is very important for teaching success. Talent fired by passion is a sure recipe for success.

I tell my astronomy class, that Astronomy is a discipline that will make you feel overwhelming special and completely insignificant at the same time. Although they may never use Astronomy or even Physics in their future jobs, I am more concerned that at the end of the day, that the fascination with the Universe that we live in never leaves them. I want to create a society of perpetual learners that carry with them a passion for learning and life, thus creating a continuous lifetime of learning experience.

As always, Einstein, sums it up nicely....when he says,

“The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity.” -

That - to me, is the essence of good teaching!

I want to thank my dear dear students who provide me with the motivation to do what I do and who really are my customers, without whom, all of us who are in the business of teaching would be nothing!

The Importance of Good Teaching

by

Dr. Janet Hill

Department of English, Saint Mary's University

I am both honoured and moved to be here tonight. Official recognition of teaching is hugely important to me, because it signals how much we in this room are aware of the place of students in our working lives. I hope I'll be able to pass on my deep pleasure in this award to the students in my classes, as well as to my colleagues and a wonderfully supportive Instructional Development department. And of course to the AAU. Thank you.

As you may know I teach drama and I have no trouble talking to students about a subject that excites me. But this event has given me an opportunity to reflect on a more important and difficult aspect of my work as a university teacher: that it's not what I talk about or even how I speak, but how I can best ensure that the disparate and individual minds in my classes are actually learning and are likely to continue to learn?

It's unfortunate that "life-long learning" has become a ready-made phrase, already a something of a dead cliché. But the notion is important. University is more than a stepping stone to a job. Universities can help students find in themselves the sense that learning goes on forever; and that among the greatest assets to continuous learning are independence, openness, and flexibility of mind. How can we, who teach at universities, enable this to happen?

This question sent me back to my own undergraduate experiences in the UK. Even though I was taught by mostly good teachers and impressive scholars, I remained muddled by the whole academic experience, with little sense that my personal, individual thoughts and ideas had any value. I confess that, except when performing onstage, I was a passive student. For three years I drifted with little active engagement in my own learning. I did get a degree, though I don't think I deserved it.

I took a very long time to find out that learning is an active and a continuous process. My undergraduate experience only began to make sense to me after I'd worked as elementary and secondary teacher, reading teacher, librarian,

actress and director and mother to four children, and, when in my mid 40s, I returned to university.

Of course, none of my students is exactly as I was as an undergraduate. Indeed some flourish immediately in the university environment, while others flounder in ways quite unlike mine. Looking back on my messy career, though, makes me acutely aware that students learn more effectively when they are actively engaged in their own learning. The university's role today (in other words, mine as teacher) is to build an environment where each student, regardless of background, can foster his or her potential for independence of mind. By this, I mean that we help students develop the ability, first for recognizing, and then for reflecting on, their own ideas, as well as on the ideas of others. Primarily, I see our work not simply as purveyors of information, but as aiding all students, whatever their abilities or learning styles, to become strong autonomous thinkers. For them to do so, we must ensure first that each student is as comfortable as possible in articulating and examining her or his ideas (and this of course means, too, that no student must seem to threaten her/his peers). In other words, students learn best if they feel comfortable and aren't afraid of saying "the wrong thing".

To garner confidence to learn and think for themselves, students need to hear frequent, genuine and careful acknowledgment of their voices by their teachers. Yes even with 90 in the class. We teachers are often very good at talking; attentive listening's an art we may find harder to cultivate. Students also need to hear one another and to experience learning as at least potentially collaborative. Ease with others doesn't mean a slack classroom. There's a world of difference between "cosy" and "comfortable"; "cosy" stultifies; whereas "comfortable" energizes. I see my mandate as generating a learning place where it's safe to challenge, to be unsettled, and to leave the classroom -- and eventually to graduate from university -- not filled with certainties, but sizzling with multiple and open questions. Shakespeare understood this. If a Shakespeare play is intelligently produced, audiences leave the theatre with mixed and complicated responses. It's hard

to go home from a good performance of King Lear utterly sure that the old king was either a villain or a victim.

I hampered my own undergraduate learning because I was scared of humiliating myself and only much later found out that if I'm to learn I have to take risks. Now, like many of my colleagues, almost every time I go into a classroom I'm nervously excited. Not because I'm unprepared: rather because in getting ready to teach I have to stretch myself. I hope "my edge" communicates itself to students, for unless they see me testing myself, I don't think they will be willing to open themselves to new ideas.

University then is a place where students need to be aware that although professors are "experts," these teachers too are learning. Sometimes their teachers genuinely don't know answers to questions, sometimes students come up with ideas more original than those in the professor's class plans. Learning happens most fully (and fullness of learning is surely what we want), when students are stimulated to play a real (not an indulgently granted) part in their own learning, to risk shifting their thinking into hitherto unexplored intellectual territory.

The importance of tentativeness

I'm aware that not being sure can be a risky business in a world where there seems to be an awful lot of solid information to take in. However, I'm convinced that having the chance to be tentative promotes intellectual initiative and flexibility. One of my strategies is that my students and I all keep "thought books" in which to develop our emerging thoughts. These are not "journals." They're writing spaces where we can articulate new ideas, comment on our own thoughts, discover changes in our readings. Every class -- Shakespeare, modern drama, first year literature - writes them. Those produced in the course my colleague and I teach in Stratford and London, for instance, may describe standing as groundlings in the yard at the new Globe theatre, or being a theatre critic of Royal Shakespeare Company productions or experiencing the sound and rhythm of his/her own voice during a workshop with the RSC voice coach. These writings allow students to observe the processes of their thinking and are fundamental for testing, and modifying ideas and

perceptions. Since all graduates will enter a world which more and more demands flexibility in thought, learning and practising mobility of mind is vital.

Sitting in the classroom has always been a wholly different experience for each member of the class. Everyone has a unique learning style and everyone will end up as a different kind of thinker.

Nowadays it's more than ever obvious that the student body is in fact a collective of diverse bodies (and minds).

It's impossible to treat and address 45 students or more as a single entity when it's clear that there's a huge range of worlds represented in the room. In one first year class last year there were students from South Africa, Belarus, Kosovo, Nigeria, mainland China, India, as well as people from all across Canada and from rural, urban, and suburban areas of the Atlantic region. As a class we all read, talked and wrote about Macbeth, but our readings diverged greatly according to our backgrounds; and while my task was always to maintain close attention to the text, the diversities of cultures and backgrounds provided rich sources for discussion; for example, students who had experienced war first hand had a different take on the conflicts in the play from those who had grown up in Canada. Operations of power, what is conscience, what motivates action, what are the objects of ambition, the role of superstition - all these issues signified differently for every student. In today's universities we teachers have new and challenging and exciting opportunities to introduce students to fresh perspectives, so to help each student expand his or her intellectual and emotional universe.

So, whatever students I teach do after university, I don't want them to look back on me as a mentor or a guide. I'd rather they left me behind as they go on opening up to fresh ideas, independently developing their own intellectual resources.

If I could choose, I'd wish that our graduates would leave with the courage to take nothing for granted. That, because of their university experience, for the rest of their lives they would ask questions of the world and of themselves. To close this evening my deepest thanks go to my students, who continually stir me to think and to go on learning.

Teaching in the Age of Globalization

by

Prof. Jean Guthrie

Department of English, Memorial University of Newfoundland

I usually meet university presidents one at a time, if at all, and from the other side of the podium. But this invitation, which I greatly appreciate, and its connexion with Anne Marie MacKinnon by which I feel very honoured, have reminded me of both the dreams we call mission statements and the nightmares of balancing to which presidents are subject. Faculty can be glad they have other nightmares: charting a new course, engaging a class that seems not to be interested, keeping up with the student work pouring over the gunwales. But as the world shrinks toward the village, we all feel responsibilities larger than our working week.

In his essay, "Educated Hope in an Age of Privatized Vision," Henry Giroux, scholar of higher education, writes of our society's obsession with "market relations, privatization, and the creation of a world-wide economy of part-time workers"; he fears for the survival of our institutions and of that endangered species: "public spaces in which people meet face to face, to talk back, ask a question, tell a story, challenge a premise, and communicate through a language capable of defending vital common institutions as a public good." To do so, he says we need a dialogue about democracy, political agency, and pedagogy. And recently George Fallis, writing for Bob Rae's Review of Ontario Universities: "An undergraduate education should include the development of political virtues and prepare citizens for participation in a deliberative democracy." Large statements and large inter-disciplinary visions; but as teachers (and presidents) we have the chance to create spaces where people do meet face to face and begin to understand what it means to have agency themselves, to foster the agency of others, and to conserve what is best in our institutions. This is what I hope for when I teach, whether the context is a literature class, a writing class, a graduate seminar on teaching, or a workshop with new faculty.

Twenty years ago the teaching of writing was assumed mainly to be essential education for those who would enter the professions, and so required at least proficiency, perhaps even elegance, in the documents of the trade whether

law, teaching, politics or the church. My colleagues and I encouraged reading critically, imitating models, attending to structure and coherence, editing and polishing, believing that a liberal education with a strong disciplinary core would free our students from the myths of this soiled world, and that they would lead their generation to tolerance and enlightenment.

My concerns, and those of compositionists generally, have since broadened, in the directions suggested by Giroux's critique. We are more aware of the material conditions of our students' lives; we have lived through the dismantling of social programs in the 1990s, the cod moratorium and its catastrophic effects on communities; now John Manley wants Canada to take hands with the US and march to the altar of corporation church with little regard for social or environmental responsibilities. Within universities, undergraduate teaching is increasingly devalued in order to promote graduate studies. It is difficult at such times to teach as though every student has the same access to learning or can learn comfortably under the conditions we provide. In this some might say, nothing has changed. But I remember when we had classes of 35 in first-year English, and almost everyone teaching those classes had a regular appointment. It has changed.

I like my classroom to be a place of respectful exchange where I learn from students as well as the other way around. My favourite sessions in the intermediate writing course are those in which students read their work. A young man tells of his relationship with his little brother, how he encouraged him in mischief until the day when he found him drowned at the public wharf, and how his girlfriend has helped him years later to address his guilt; a young woman reads of a very public affair her mother had in a small town and how she and her brother supported their father and each other; a young man tells of setting the woods on fire near his community and being terrified for others' safety--and his own; the young woman who reads last apologizes for the triviality of her essay--about how she missed her family when studying at a university on this side of the Gulf; but

her portrait of Mum, Dad, brother and dog, at supper without her, and the view across St. Mary's Bay, touches us all. The students are careful with each other's work; they are becoming aware of one another's strengths; and they are deepening their sense of the word and the world. The understanding of others' lives they take from this exchange may be one of the most important classroom experiences they have.

I want my students to be good writers in academic and professional terms, and I still do most of the things I have always done to encourage imaginative, disciplined writing. However, I no longer use texts as models but as material for discussion and critical analysis. And I hope students will see themselves not as guardians of certain language preferences but first as human beings who not only can use language to connect with others, but aspire to do so, whether they are telling their stories in class or engaging the wider political and social arena. The underprivileged in our own country ask us to listen to what they say, not just to how they say it. Those formerly colonized peoples world-wide who have been forced away from their mother tongues, and speak forms of English which do not sound like standard varieties, seek respect for their Englishes and understanding of their situations. In short, my concern is how to help students in arts disciplines who wish to write well in professional contexts also to take at least some of these ethical issues into consideration: I want them to think of knowledge and values as socially constructed, and to be willing to create democratic, friendly environments in which people feel safe to talk back, ask questions, tell their stories, challenge received opinion, and imagine better ways for us all to live together on this planet.

The same issues arise in faculty development and the preparation of graduate students for teaching in the post-secondary context. In the competing discourses about goals and practices, how do beginning teachers position themselves? When asked to respond to the analytical paper of first-year student "Kim," a paper that shows commitment to the task but is technically very weak, they implicitly articulate their sense of what they think teachers are supposed to be and do in this situation.

Kim should be ashamed to pass this in.

What is Kim doing here? This is a university.

This is so bad. I would start with Kim's sentence boundaries, syntax, and spelling.

If the university is admitting Kim, I'll grade the content and circle the worst of the gaffes. It's not my job to teach high-school grammar.

You may have noticed that I hope for responses other than these, but I first have to reinforce the teacherly values such comments embrace: you care about academic standards; you want to give Kim a vocabulary for addressing those tangled sentences; you are giving primacy to content over form on the first reading. Good.

Very rarely someone will say, "When I started here in first year, I wrote like Kim; in fact I was probably weaker," and she will tell the story of a teacher who noticed her difficulties and set her to write and rewrite every week on issues she could handle, until she could grasp the aims and conventions of academic writing. She is now at the top of her profession and has returned to start graduate work. Even without such a disclosure to lead the way, I want to encourage new and future colleagues to construct Kim first as a learner struggling with the why and how of writing in university, and to ask what we can do to help.

I teach first-year writing classes regularly because I enjoy seeing lights go on. Last winter, I had a class of 30 students who did not read newspapers, and knew nothing about any of the issues in the news in January. So we brought news items to class regularly for discussion, and for the last month of the semester, they worked in groups towards a research paper and a poster presentation on a topic they had chosen: Neil Stonechild, the children of Davis Inlet, Myriam Bédard, Maher Arar, same-sex marriage, and so on. After the class had viewed all the posters, and written evaluations of them, each group took questions from the others. I found their confidence and authority remarkable, as well as their new-found understanding. Were they all now accomplished writers as a result? No, but as one student said when asked about the value of the project: "Three months ago, I didn't even know who Neil Stonechild was; now I know a lot more about what aboriginal people face in the system." The class raised serious questions about social justice, ethics, and responsibility; they used researching, writing and dialogue as ways to discover the histories and viewpoints of people they had never met; they developed ways of

talking about racism, sexism, and homophobia; and in answering their peers' questions, they began to be agents of change.

I am proud to belong to a university that makes this kind of learning possible for entering students; and that takes on local and international inequities asking, "What can we do to help?" For Memorial, this means supporting the development of women's centres in Indonesia, improvements to birthing and post-natal care in Indonesia and Africa, service in our province with centres working to improve women's status and reduce violence against women and children, outreach to inexperienced parents who ask for support when babies are born, and of course connecting students with these projects as apprentices to experts from whom they learn action research. I saw a video recently made by a Master's student of Women's Studies, the result of her work in Nepal: about three sisters who offer trekking tours in the Himalayas and train other women to do likewise, thus helping Nepalese women escape dire poverty and drudgery and provide a needed service to tourists. So as well as partnerships in

science and technology, we are engaged in places where agency is not taken for granted and excellence is measured by how well we apply our learning to support people in achieving that agency.

When you argue with your other voice about resources, I know you know that active learning in the early years of university is worth the cost, and that growth through critical thinking, dialogue and writing is very hard to support if classes are too large. When students specialize only in note-taking and regurgitating, when they think of knowledge as inert, they are less likely to have a sense of belonging in university; less likely to ask how the children of Natuashish experience the world or what agency means to women in Nepal; and less likely to realize the competence agency confers. And after graduation they may be reluctant to join what George Fallis calls the "civic conversation" about the future of democratic society. Let us all try to preserve undergraduate education as an experience that invigorates minds and hearts by respecting students and inviting them to join this conversation.