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Awards for Excellence in Teaching

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**Presentations to the
Atlantic University Presidents**

**by the recipients of the
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Dr. Erin Steuter
Department of Sociology
Mount Allison University

Instructional Leadership Award

Professor Judith Scrimger
Department of Public Relations
Mount Saint Vincent University

The Importance of Good Teaching

by

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I think about teaching every day. I think about what is going well and take satisfaction in it. I think about what isn't working and develop ideas to fix it. I think of the teaching challenges faced by my colleagues and provide unsolicited advice to them. I think about my role in the classroom and the nature of my relationship with students. I think of new things that I can try and ways to re-vamp the tried and true. Reflecting on teaching is one of the chief joys of my profession. To this end I have developed some core principles of good teaching that work for me and may resonate with others.

Safe Space - In terms of principles, I believe, first and foremost, that learning needs to take place in a safe space in which students are never mocked, where all ideas can be legitimately explored, where passionate debate takes place within a climate of respect and civility, and where students feel safe enough to try out new ideas and explore new forms of learning. Having been marginalized by teachers when I was a student for my support of unorthodox ideas, I now make it a principle to never require students to agree with me or with any given perspective. They always know that they need to demonstrate accurate knowledge of the material covered in the course and that they are then completely free to develop their own informed perspective on the issues. Nothing would mortify me more than if I thought I had in any way silenced a student in the classroom. I think freedom of thought and speech are the cornerstone of a good education and I seek to uphold this in my classroom everyday.

Organization in All Things - I'm the kind of person who reads all the guidebooks before I go on a trip so I know all the details in advance. Providing a well organized and structured course is a central priority for me as a teacher. I very carefully plan out all the course components, dues dates, duration of units, and structures of evaluation. The students always know from the first day of class how the course will unfold, and of course I have also scheduled in unexpected

delays and opportunities for creative side trips and tangents! Someone once told me that trying to learn huge amounts of information in a course, is like trying take a drink from a fire hydrant, therefore, I try to pace the course material so that students can have enough time to process and reflect on the new material.

Second Chances - Universities are places of growth and development where students need to be able to learn from their mistakes without facing insurmountable penalties. If a student submits late work, misses class or is guilty of academic dishonesty, there needs to be appropriate consequences for their actions but they also need a second chance to show that they can mature and develop their skills. I often provide my students with a "get out of jail free card" which allows them a one-week extension, no questions asked, to be used once at any time in the term. I am never "at war" with my students. I enjoy their stages of academic maturation and offer firm and consistent penalties with a good measure of humour and tolerance for the inevitable missteps of the undergraduate learning curve. I once heard a former prostitute, who was now running a shelter to help sex workers leave the streets, say on the radio that she would have never been able to leave her former life and finish university if it hadn't been for the understanding and second chances offered by her professors. I would like to think that I might be that person in some student's life.

Try, Try and Try Again - I once had a course that I hated teaching. It was too big to suit my teaching style and it wasn't working for me or my students. On hearing my complaints, one of my colleagues stated that he always had one course that he hated to teach and that was just the way it was sometimes. I couldn't bear the thought of having a hated course in my rotation, so I kept trying new innovations, confident in my belief that if I could just re-organize the course in some way, all would be well. It took almost 10 years but I eventually found the right solution and now

happily teach this first year course using a successful experiential approach. It is one of my principles of teaching that there is a solution to every pedagogical problem and it is worth the trouble to find it.

Critical Thinking - Developing the skills to analyze social situations with insight and sophistication is the central tenant of my discipline and I embrace this mission whole heartedly. I regularly ask students to consider who benefits and loses by the current social arrangements of various institutions in our society. We explore core critical thinking concepts such as blaming the victim, unanticipated consequences, and vested interests; we examine the way in which certain forms of knowledge become authoritative while others are marginalized; we deconstruct the concept of objectivity in the media. For me good teaching in my discipline means that students will leave my course with a toolkit full of critical thinking strategies to help them make sense of their social world.

Applied Knowledge - Another principle of good teaching for me is to make the course material relevant to students' lives. I have designed assignments where students apply a particular theory to their own family dynamics; write letters to their grandparents explaining a current social issue; and ask students to select issues of personal importance and develop action plans for social change. One particular favourite of the undergraduate crowd is an exercise where students apply principles of equitable division of labour to the household chores they share with their roommates.

Experiential Learning - Every year in a large introductory course, I test all the students on their learning style and I find that each year there are increasing numbers of "K" learners who learn best by doing. Perhaps in a less credentialist culture, these students would have bypassed university and gone straight to a career where they could receive on-the-job training. I strive to address the needs of all types of learners in my classes and for the K learners I have developed hands-on activities where students discover for themselves the insights and analyses necessary to make sense of a social problem.

Independent Learners - While I have a few moments in every course, when I am the "sage on the stage", in general I find that students benefit greatly from discovering knowledge for themselves. In the information age, the process of doing independent research and the skills gained in learning where to find relevant and reliable information may be the most significant legacy of their undergraduate educations.

Professionalism - I believe that instilling professionalism in students so that they produce first rate work is an important element of good teaching. My model for this is the strategies utilized in professional schools such as Medicine or Engineering. In these professional schools, students have assignments that have real-world consequences and a C student can't be allowed to make someone ill or build a structure that will fall down. I believe that cultivating professional expectations builds student pride in their own work and helps to start them off on a confident footing in their careers. I want to send students out into the world capable of truly connecting to real world issues that they have personally understood and thoughtfully analyzed while at the same time delivering professional quality work for the sake of their own confidence, the reputation of myself and the school, and for the benefit of the community that they will be joining.

Community Outreach - Historically the Ivory Tower has been a place to retreat from the distractions of the world in order to have the time and energy to focus on higher learning. Yet, critics argue that the development and dissemination of knowledge exclusively within an academic institution is not representative of the challenges and realities of the "outside" world. They maintain that educations produced in this setting are elitist and unrepresentative of the broader diversity of opinion and knowledge in the rest of society. I address this challenge by trying to harness the students' outward-looking energy, and steer it toward the theoretical pedagogical goals I had set for the course with the thought that I might also improve their confidence in those real world skills. I have developed community outreach activities in my courses in which students have: written a resource guide for women in shelters; set up and run a girl-power camp for children in the community; written a children's work book that

explores gender issues; and developed media-literacy clubs for school children.

Care and Consideration - My final principle of good teaching, to date, revolves around my relationship with students. I have never been one of the teachers who is friends with the students. It just isn't my way. However, I do care tremendously about the student's learning process. I seek to ensure that I am fair, that I respond to their concerns, that I take into consideration the rest of their workload and their life activities. I also am very careful about recognizing power dynamics with my students and respecting professional boundaries. Students have let me know that they recognize and value my caring approach to teaching.

Final Thoughts - I am grateful to have discovered the community of educators that convene at local and international teaching conferences. I have learned lots of tips and techniques from them including free writes, random acts of poetry, grading rubrics, Writing Across the Curriculum, simulations and role play activities, etc. I've met many inspirational teachers who have a range of educational styles from performer to facilitator. I really appreciate being given this award by the Association of Atlantic Universities. The conferences and climate of support for teaching that this organization has developed has been very important to my development as a teacher and I am very grateful to be recognized with this honour.

The Importance of Good Conversation: Whatever happened to office hours?

by

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About six weeks ago, the March 2007 issue of *University Affairs* arrived in my mailbox. An article titled Welcome to MyWorld describes the challenges of keeping in touch with students who now see e-mail as “so last century”. Carleton University Chemistry professor Bob Burk describes how his teenaged daughter explained to him that e-mail was a dinosaur. “No one uses that anymore,” she told him. With her guidance he signed up for an MSN Messenger account. He gave his contact information to his class of 500 1st-year students. He now logs on for 45 minutes late in the evening and says the advantage is that he answers questions from students *while* they are studying. I have to admit that reading this article while on sabbatical did **not** inspire me. My immediate response was this: *Isn't it enough that I've received emails from students in the wee hours of the morning and worse still was sitting at my laptop at that time of the night responding to them?* Now, I apparently have to be on FaceBook and MSN Messenger to be considered accessible to my students.

Not long after I read the MyWorld article, I received an email from a former student. He graduated 10 years ago and this was the first time I had heard from him for many years. Now a very successful professional with a multi-national company, he wanted to know how he might “give back to the university and the program which had given so much to him”. He did some reminiscing and I'd like to quote one of his comments: “I'll never forget sitting across from you during one of our first one-on-ones. I was fortunate to have you believe in me and say, ‘you ARE a good writer. You DO have a talent. Believe in yourself.’ This is something I needed to hear because I didn't believe in myself at that time. It was only then that I started to find a confidence that I didn't have”

More recently, I was leafing through the April issue of *Scientific American*. An article that caught my eye was about Dr. Sonja Lyubormirsky, a psychologist at the University of California who studies the science of happiness. While Dr. Lyubormirsky's efforts to bring

scientific rigor to the study of that amorphous human emotion were most interesting, what really grabbed my attention was an early paragraph that describes how she began her successful career in this particular area of study. The researcher can remember the exact moment. As a young graduate student she had what she described as an intriguing **conversation** with her supervisor. It was about a woman who had lost both her parents to the Holocaust but who was able to find much happiness in her life. For Lyubormirsky, this face-to-face and informal conversation set her off on her life's work.

As I thought about Bob Burk's use of on-line chat rooms to communicate with students, I wondered what kinds of questions were being asked by those first-year chemistry students and how deep the actual exchanges might be. My student's comment about his conversations with me in my office brought about a feeling of intense regret. It made me realize that with the routine use of email, I don't meet with students in person as often as I once did. Sonya Lyubormirsky's “aha” moment when talking with her supervisor, made me wonder what is happening to good old-fashioned conversations between students and professors.

So I did what every academic does. I went to the literature looking for research that examined faculty-student interaction. This is not the place to present a comprehensive literature review, but I want to tell you about two studies in particular. In the days before e-mail, a group of researchers in the United States, headed by Robert Wilson, published a book, *College Professors and their Impact on Students*. While much research has focused on the correlations between good teaching and academic performance as measured by grades, this longitudinal research identified students who genuinely developed intellectually--in the sense that they were interested in ideas and demonstrated an openness to pursue them. The researchers then asked this particular group of students to point to the faculty members who were most influential in their development. A follow up study compared

these professors to their less influential colleagues. Interestingly, there was no difference in student participation in their classrooms or in how well they organized their courses. The key differences were in two specific areas. When asked to select from a range of activities regularly performed by faculty members, the influential teachers were more likely to choose undergraduate teaching as their top choice. They loved teaching undergraduate students. The other key difference was found in their out-of-class relationships with students. While both influential faculty and their colleagues socialized with their students to the same extent (e.g. coffee, pub nights, and student parties), the influential professors were the ones who spent time discussing intellectual questions, campus issues, and giving educational and career advice to their students through one-on-one conversation.

I could find no recent and comparable research that examined faculty role in the intellectual development of their students in the age of computer mediated communication (CMC). I did find one interesting study that had some things to say about conversation between students and faculty. This project examined the behaviors of students in a new degree program in Information Environments. This program provided students with a wide range of computer mediated communication methods as both part of the pedagogy and as part of the content of the degree. The researchers themselves were surprised by the results: face-to-face communication with professors was preferred over all forms of computer-mediated communication. Because the faculty commuted between two different campuses and had limited office hours, professors encouraged the students to contact them electronically. The researchers found that the students would often wait until faculty members were physically available in office hours to pose their questions about course material. While students did use the many CMC options available to them, they used them for social communications and peer bonding rather than for learning activities. (Johnson, D., Sutton, P., & Poon, J. Face-to-Face vs CMC: Student Communication in a Technologically Rich Learning Environment. http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/coffs00/papers/daniel_johnson.pdf.)

My own years of experience have shown me that

meeting with students in my office often leads to long and involved discussions of ideas. I can't count the number of times I've pulled a book or journal off my shelf and said, "you might find this helpful in developing your understanding." These days in the age of instant messaging and e-mail, I find office hours can be pretty lonely. The student who used to come in to ask a routine question about the course or the reading and stayed for a longer conversation, now emails me her question. And while email is efficient in dealing with many issues, rarely does a "conversation", in the sense of exchanging ideas take place—at least not the way it does during my personal meetings with students.

If we can agree that conversation is important to the intellectual development of our undergraduate students, how can we make sure it happens in an increasingly digital world? While many professors will complain about the time they spend on email these days, I think we'd be less than honest if we didn't admit that email can also save time for faculty by limiting face-to-face contact with students. What might have turned into a half-hour or hour long discussion in the office can be handled in a few minutes at the keyboard. I believe we have to get those students back into our offices. I used to spend considerable time reviewing and providing detailed written comments on the final drafts in my senior writing course. In the last two years, I've been scheduling one-on-one sessions and we go through the draft together. Not only do the students turn in much stronger final projects but I've had many fruitful conversations with students about the writing process. Of course, I am blessed with teaching at Mount Saint Vincent University where classes are often small enough to allow for this one-on-one contact with every student.

While professors have the primary responsibility for initiating conversations with students, university administrators can also help to make it happen. In the interests of time, I will make only three suggestions.

First, create spaces where faculty and student interaction arises naturally. I've recently been spending every Wednesday in the atrium in the computer science building at Dalhousie University. I know most of the faculty by sight because they are my husband's colleagues. The

atrium is a large open space with tables and comfortable benches where students gather, often in groups. At the far end of the space is a Second Cup coffee franchise. Faculty members regularly make the trek for coffee and I've rarely seen a time when a professor hasn't stopped to talk with students and these conversations regularly go beyond pleasantries. The student and professor will huddle together over a lap top screen and an obviously animated discussion ensues.

Second, create time for these conversations to unfold. Timetabling can be a key issue. MSVU used to keep the Tuesday/Thursday noon to 1:30 p.m. time slots open for scheduling meetings. I taught a class in mass media just before lunch. Often half or more of the class of 40 would push tables together in the cafeteria and the discussion topic from class time would continue to be debated. I only found out about this impromptu discussion group by accident but after I was invited to join them, it became one of my favorite teaching/learning activities. Sadly, we are so short of classroom space that the TTH break no longer exists and many of us now teach through the lunch time slots. We need registrars who can look creatively at timetabling and ensure that opportunities exist beyond class time for students and their professors to meet and for students to meet with each other.

Finally, we need to continue to develop and support teaching and learning centres on our campuses where faculty members can share techniques for getting the conversations going. The AAU Teaching Showcase has been a very successful initiative in this regard and I've been lucky enough to learn from both of the 2006 AAU teaching award winners, Erin Steuter and TA Loeffler. If I were looking for role models for using conversation to bring about student learning, these two professors would be ideal examples. Whether it's working with her students on projects in women's shelters, a field trip to meet Noam Chomsky, or the summer Shakespeare in the Park series, Erin can often be found in conversation with students about critical ideas. TA is cut from the same cloth. Her commitment to the pedagogy of experiential learning means she regularly spends time with her students in one-on-one reflection. While it's an honor for me to be selected for the Ann Marie MacKinnon award, it is humbling to stand beside these two excellent scholars and teachers.

Let me finish by saying that I've suffered more than a little anxiety about choosing to talk to you about the importance of conversation. As I've made the case for what some might call an old-fashioned concept, I hope you haven't seen me as one of those soon-to-retire professors longing for the good old days before email, blogs and on-line chat rooms. There is much of value in the use of new technologies in our teaching but for undergraduates who are being introduced for the first time to the scholarly world of ideas, I believe a conversation with a professor who loves teaching and loves scholarship is the foundation of intellectual development. A recent Maclean's report found that students who attend smaller universities tend to be much more satisfied with their experiences. A handful of larger institutions also made the grade in student satisfaction. Large or small, I would bet that at those universities, students are having real conversations with their professors. Let's work together to keep those conversations happening in our Atlantic Canadian universities.