



ASSOCIATION OF
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Awards for Excellence in Teaching

2009

**Presentations to the
Atlantic University Presidents**

**by the recipients of the
2009 Association of Atlantic Universities**

Distinguished Teaching Award

Dr. Etienne Côté
Department of Companion Animals
University of Prince Edward Island

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

Instructional Leadership Award

Dr. Ann Bigelow
Department of Psychology
St. Francis Xavier University

The Importance of Good Teaching

by

Dr. Etienne Côté

Department of Companion Animals
University of Prince Edward Island

Thank you. It is a great honour to be here this evening. I wish to thank most sincerely the Association of Atlantic Universities for presenting me with this prestigious award. I am here really more as a spokesperson for the many people who have made it possible for me to receive it, and I wish to thank them all—my colleagues at the University of Prince Edward Island, the structure of the University that has made it possible to do the things I do, my students, family, and friends. Je remercie de tout cœur l'Association des Universités de l'Atlantique et tous ceux et celles qui m'ont aidé dans mon cheminement. C'est grâce à eux que j'ai l'honneur d'être parmi vous ce soir.

When I heard that the topic I was to speak on was "The importance of good teaching", I thought it seemed almost too obvious. After all, this is in the context of receiving a teaching award. It felt like being invited by the Canadian Diabetes Association to talk about the importance of insulin. But then I thought of all the other obligations and pressures we face that can interfere with teaching or detract from it. Like many of us, I also have research and service commitments, and only 24 hours in a day. And these other obligations can gradually detract from teaching. So in that light, it made a great deal of sense to talk about the importance of good teaching here tonight.

Like many of us, I have had role models who were outstanding teachers, individuals

who were truly inspirational and whose example I've tried to follow and adapt. They helped me understand how I myself want to teach. But I would also say that I have had some appallingly bad teachers, and they also have been very valuable. These are the negative role models, who I knew I wanted to avoid imitating at all cost-- uninspiring, tedious and deeply unmotivating. In this respect it turned out I was in good company early on: I came across a quotation in the student newspaper during my undergrad years. You know, I have a file at home. Actually, I have many files in my filing cabinets, all on the fascinating aspects of cardiovascular medicine – cardiac arrhythmias, birth defects of the heart, intricate mechanisms of cardiac dysfunction - that I would love to talk about. But that would be very dry in a setting like tonight's reception. And then I have one file I call the Good File. It's pretty thin because I only put the best of the best in the Good File. It's where I keep things that are fun and that really speak to me, that I can turn to and always get a laugh out of, even if I'm feeling blue. The Good File is timeless, important, and fun. And I was looking through it in preparation for this talk tonight and I came across this newspaper clipping. As you can see it's pretty old, yellowed and dog-eared, back when we had these things we call newspapers. It's a quotation from Albert Einstein, with this famous picture of him sticking his tongue out printed above it. When I read his words,

twenty-some years ago, they really clicked. This quotation symbolizes everything I want to avoid when I teach, and has guided me ever since I began teaching. Einstein wrote it in a book called "Examining in Harvard College" about 60 years ago, and it reads as follows:

One had to cram all this stuff into one's mind, whether one liked it or not. This coercion had such a deterring effect that, after I had passed the final examination, I found the consideration of any scientific problems distasteful to me for an entire year... It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom; without this it goes to wrack and ruin without fail. It is a very grave mistake to think that the enjoyment of seeing and searching can be promoted by means of coercion and a sense of duty. To the contrary, I believe it would be possible to rob even a healthy beast of prey of its voraciousness if it were possible, with the aid of a whip, to force the beast to devour continuously, even when not hungry...

So if this is what is to be avoided, then how should good teaching be accomplished? To me, teaching a good class is like making a good turkey sandwich. A good turkey sandwich has turkey, of course, but it also has mayonnaise, to make it go down well. A lecture is the same: the turkey is the information I want my students to retain--

disease processes, or important symptoms, or mechanisms of how medications work in the patient. They need to know this because it's the information that their future patients will depend on. It's the most nutritious. But by itself, like the turkey, it's pretty dry. So I add the mayo, in the form of, say, a case example: "OK, those are the facts. Let's look at how they apply. This is Fluffy, a 3 year-old male cat presented because the owner noticed the following symptoms...". And then I proceed with the case description, which really captures the students' attention and makes it all go down well. It has to stay balanced: all mayo, or all case anecdotes, is too rich and doesn't have enough substance. It leads to indigestion and a lack of fulfillment. And all turkey is no good either-- too dry, and even if it's very nutritious, it's not much fun to choke down. So to me, one of the goals of teaching a good lecture is to find the right proportions of turkey and mayo.

I've talked about negative role models and turkey sandwiches but I haven't given specific, concrete examples of teaching techniques. So I'll end by mentioning the two suggestions I've gotten over the years about teaching a good class that have really stuck with me. First is "Get a good night's sleep the night before." And second is "Always end early. That way the audience might think 'I wonder if he has any more like that.'" I was given ten minutes for this talk and I see I've used eight of them so far, so with that, I thank you once again.

The Importance of Good Teaching: Teaching as Inquiry

by

Dr. Shelagh Crooks

Department of Philosophy, Saint Mary's University

Universities have long fostered a robust academic culture for sharing the results of disciplinary research. This tradition of open exchange is the essence of the academy, and it is essential to the advancement of knowledge. It is no accident that this is so: Knowledge is a social phenomenon, and it grows through social interaction. The hurly-burly of intellectual debate among peers is the testing ground of academic theories: In debate, theories are clarified, refined, corrected, extended, and they become the creative spark for new theories, and for new ways of conceptualizing issues.

But teaching in the academy is not at all like this. It operates within a culture of individualism and isolation. As teachers we have developed few habits or conventions for exploring the impact of our pedagogical practices on student learning, or for sharing what we know about teaching with colleagues who might build upon it. As teachers we almost always work alone. When we walk into our workplace, the classroom, we close the door on our colleagues. When we emerge, we do not talk about our teaching, about what is going well and what is not, and why, for we have no shared experience to talk about. Indeed, teaching problems are seen to have a significantly different status in the academy than research problems. Teaching problems are regarded as 'troubling' or, perhaps, 'bothersome', but not 'interesting' and 'important'. They are problems to be 'fixed', or failing that, covered up and ignored, but

they are not problems to be 'investigated'. In teaching, a problem is something you don't want to have, perhaps because it signifies personal failure of some kind. In research, a problem is a good thing. It is the point of departure for inquiry, the centre around which all intellectual activity revolves. And so we have side-by-side in the academy, two disparate cultures, two solitudes – one which is deeply based in inquiry and collegiality, and the other which is anything but.

I find this state of affairs remarkable. It is remarkable because the university is a place of learning, and yet there is very little systematic research about learning going on. It is remarkable because the university calls itself a community of scholars and yet, with rare exceptions, no such community exists for those who want to pursue inquiry into teaching and learning. It is remarkable because faculty who ordinarily demand rigorous standards of evidence and justification for knowledge—claims within their special field of inquiry, seem content with lesser standards for beliefs and practices in regard to teaching. And it is remarkable, because it is not at all clear that problems in teaching are less significant and less deserving of rigorous investigation than research problems within the disciplines.

The truth is that teaching is a complex intellectual and human activity. It can be done well and it can be done poorly. If we are to be effective teachers, we need to know a good deal more than just our

subject. We need to know how individuals experience the subject. We need to know the ways the subject can come to be understood, and the ways in which it can be misunderstood. And to engage in this kind of inquiry, we need to have given some thought to the nature of understanding itself. We need to ask ourselves -- 'What is it to understand a concept or theory?' 'How is understanding to be manifested in the context of a conversation in class, in a group presentation, in an item of analysis, or in fictional writing?' 'How is understanding demonstrated in my discipline?' And we need to have a clear conception of why understanding a particular subject-matter, rather than the retention of facts about it, should be the goal of teaching in the first place. These are serious, challenging, intellectual questions. They are questions that cannot be answered intuitively or anecdotally; they require investigation, and careful reflection on the results of that investigation. They are questions to be discussed and debated with peers, and even with students. Indeed, I would argue that these questions are presupposed in the very act of teaching, for the manner in which individual teachers answer them has consequences in terms of the decisions they make about curriculum design, teaching methodology, and assessment.

There are other questions to be investigated -- questions which speak to pressing institutional and public concerns about student success in higher education. Among these are questions such as, 'Why is it that first-year students drop out of university at a rate of 30%?' and, 'Why do only 50% of students who are in university actually graduate?' And there are questions that are peculiar to a particular discipline or to particular instructor. I teach philosophy, and

I am intent that my students experience their learning in my classroom as relevant and, indeed, important to their lives. I want them to make a connection -- to apply the concepts, arguments and critical methods of philosophers to the problems and issues that really matter to them. And so, I find myself inquiring into issues of teaching methodology. I ask, 'How can I create a bridge between my students' daily experience and decision-making, and philosophical analyses of, say, personal identity, or the principle of universalizability in ethics?' 'How will my students come to know that the real take away from philosophical training, is not a familiarity with the writings of the great philosophers, but the development of a capacity for analytic thinking, and with that, the development of their own intellectual autonomy?'

I believe that asking these questions and countless others like them, makes me a better teacher. It makes me inquire into my own assumptions about my discipline, about my students, and about teaching itself. It makes me inclined to try new things in the classroom, to conduct experiments using different course materials and different pedagogies. It makes me engage the scholarly literature in teaching and learning, and it allows me to take the risk of revealing to my colleagues that I actually have teaching problems and to seek their advice. In doing all of this, I learn about teaching and learning.

And so, I am here, not to speak to the issue of the importance of good teaching in the academy, but to speak to the importance of supporting good teaching. I believe that good teaching is no accident -- it is the product of substantive intellectual work, work that goes well beyond the development

of an individual or 'signature' classroom technique. Thus, if we are going to support good teaching, it is imperative that we create an environment in the university where teaching inquiry is respected and rewarded, where innovations in curriculum and pedagogy get tried out, and where questions and answers about education are exchanged, critiqued, and built upon. In short, we need to bring teaching out of the closet in the academy. We need to create a new culture around teaching – a culture that is dynamic, inquiry-based, and, above all, collegial.

Of course, cultural change, especially in the complex and often conflicted workplace of the university, does not happen quickly or easily. Institutions, and leaders within institutions, will need to embrace the vision of teaching as inquiry, and they will need to commit to making change happen. In practical terms, this means that universities will need to put their money – understood both literally and figuratively -- where their mouth is.

Let me be more specific. First of all, teaching inquiry needs to become a fully legitimate – 'counted' kind of scholarly work in the university. Faculty simply will not pursue teaching inquiry if, in doing so, they risk their careers. This means that teaching inquiry can't be treated as just something extra that a faculty member does – an add-on to her real/disciplinary scholarship. It needs to be recognized and rewarded as scholarship full stop.

Secondly, good talk about good teaching is

unlikely to happen if the leaders in the university – presidents, deans, and department chairs -- do not expect it and invite it into being. This means that leaders need to organize and protect time for interested faculty to work together on inquiry projects. And this work needs to be celebrated and made public, not just during the annual teaching workshop for faculty – but in new venues and in new ways, that are likely to draw attention to teaching and teaching inquiry in the university.

Thirdly, taking teaching inquiry seriously means investing in it. The mechanisms of support in place for disciplinary research – grants, sabbaticals, assistance with grant writing, travel money – need to be made available to scholars of teaching, and should be seen as an important institutional investment in the development of a culture of teaching and learning.

Finally, I would like to say that though I believe that teaching inquiry is valuable in itself, I believe that its greatest value lies in its potential to have a positive impact on what happens in the classroom between the teacher and her students, and, by extension, its potential to address the very serious problems of student retention and success that I alluded to earlier. If I am right about this, then universities have a very powerful reason, indeed an obligation, to get into the business of promoting and developing teaching inquiry among faculty. And given what is at stake here – student success or failure – we should waste no time in getting on with it.

The Importance of Good Teaching: Empowering Students for Life-Long Learning

by

Dr. Ann Bigelow

Department of Psychology, St. Francis Xavier University

I want to thank the AAU for the honor of this award. I feel, however, that I am just a representative of the many people to whom this award belongs because the award is really honoring the Service Learning Program at StFX. I want to thank the staff who make the program run - Marla Gaudet, Iris Bertsch, Gina Sampson, and Michelle Hirschfeld; the administration of StFX, particularly Dr. Mary McGillivray, our Academic Vice President, under whose auspices the Service Learning Program operates; the faculty and community partners who participate in Service Learning; and of course the students. Personally I also want to thank my family, particularly my husband, Chris, for their support.

I was told that I was to talk about the importance of good teaching, which is a daunting task, particularly to deliver to this audience of many good teachers who care about what they do.

What is good teaching? For a start it is presenting content in a clear and organized way. But textbooks can do that. Teaching is something in addition. To teach requires a balancing act between challenging students and encouraging and supporting them. To teach well, students need to be challenged to think about the subject matter, to think critically, and to become engaged in their learning. But probably most importantly, they need to be challenged to look at their presuppositions and to be aware of their own biases, which often requires them to

dispense with their usual way of thinking and to acquire new perspectives, which may mean they must move out of their comfort zone. But these challenges must be framed within a context of encouragement and support so that students trust that they have the capacities to do what is required of them.

The core of my classroom teaching has been in developmental psychology. Everyone knows something about child development because they know children and they have been a child themselves. Yet what drives development, what makes it flourish, and what can make it derail are not always self evident. So students must examine and possibly forego their preconceived ideas of children's developmental processes in the light of research evidence. After they do this, students can come full circle and begin to reclaim their independent thinking. Ideally they eventually no longer just want to know what the research says or theories predict, but they can take this information and reason through problems themselves. To see students do this is probably the greatest sense of accomplishment a teacher can have because this type of learning is intellectually empowering and a model for life-long learning.

There is no one way to facilitate this kind of learning. The particular style of teaching has to match the personality of the teacher. That is, good teachers have to be authentic to

themselves. But challenge balanced with encouragement and support are key qualities to teaching well.

Service Learning is a teaching pedagogy that embodies this philosophy. Students are challenged to view the world from new perspectives and are often taken out of their comfort zone. Yet they are supported along the way and encouraged to value their own abilities. I have found that service learning is a powerful means for teaching students to recognize how the subject matter they are studying affects real world problems, to face their often unacknowledged presumptions, and to allow themselves to be empowered by their learning process.

StFX used to be the only university in Canada with a Service Learning program. This is no longer the case. Now there are many universities with service learning programs. Each program is unique to its institution. At StFX, service learning is a university wide program offered to students in any discipline or year. We have Course-Based Service Learning and Immersion Service Learning.

Course-Based Service Learning involves service learning components to existing academic courses. Instead of, or in addition to, traditional term papers or laboratory assignments, students work on projects in the community, developed in conjunction with community agencies or groups, that involve the subject matter of the course. Whether a course has a service learning component is entirely up to the professor, who structures the assignment so that students can connect the project with the course content. Although students must agree to fulfill the expectations of the community agency, such as show up when

expected, complete the work, the grade for the service learning component of the course is based on demonstrated learning rather than fulfilling the obligations of the project.

In recent years, StFX has offered an average of 50 courses with a Course-Based Service Learning component. These courses have involved between 35 and 45 faculty members across the faculties of Arts, Science, and Professional programs. Course-Based Service Learning has partnered with approximately 75 community agencies to provide work projects for our students. We offer over 900 Course-Based Service Learning experiences for students each year. Thus every year approximately a quarter of our student body participates in Course-Based Service Learning.

In Immersion Service Learning, faculty take small groups of students to developing countries or to unique communities within Canada. In recent years, approximately 70 students per year have gone on the seven Immersion Service Learning trips offered during our February break and in May. In the communities that they travel to, faculty and students are immersed in the local culture. They work with people on a community project and participate in educational sessions with community leaders, where they learn first hand about culture and development issues within that particular community context.

Immersion Service Learning is an intense learning experience. For many students, it is the first time they find themselves in a minority, in terms of culture, race, or language. The students live and work in communities quite different from the reality that most students have encountered

before. These communities have experienced poverty and political or environmental hardships at levels the students have not. There is nothing glamorous or romantic about poverty or oppression. But what is unexpected is what can co-exist with such circumstances - like resourcefulness, caring, resilience, and community spirit.

When students return, they tend to see their own communities differently. They have a strong appreciation and gratefulness for things that were taken for granted before. Yet the students also notice things that they did not pay attention to before. They become aware of the marginalized within our society, the hardships that some here in Canada endure. The experience also makes students' academic life more meaningful as they connect the experience to what they are learning in their courses in economics, political science, history, sociology, and so on. For some students, the experience changes their life plans. They switch majors and go into fields of international development or direct community service. However, for most students plans do not change, but the students become a different sort of business person, parent, mechanic, nurse, doctor, lawyer, or whatever, than they would have been without the experience. It broadens students' outlook and how they live their lives.

Service Learning, both Course-Based and Immersion, are powerful learning experiences. Students are challenged, but with the support of faculty they can meet the challenge. In the process students realize new potential within themselves and are empowered by their learning. And that is what good teaching is all about.