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Awards for Excellence in Teaching

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**Presentations to the
Atlantic University Presidents**

**by the recipients of the
2010 Association of Atlantic Universities**

Distinguished Teaching Award

Dr. Diana Austin
Department of English
University of New Brunswick

Dr. Jane Magrath
Department of English
University of Prince Edward Island

Instructional Leadership Award

Dr. Brenda Robertson
Department of Recreation Management and
Kinesiology
Acadia University

The Importance of Good Teaching: “*You probably won’t remember me but...*”

by

Dr. Diana Austin

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Why do I think good teaching matters? Because students say so.

Sooner or later as teachers we are all likely to receive messages from former students that begin, “You probably won’t remember me but” What follows these tentative words is often an eye-opening--and humbling--answer to a perennial question: does good teaching really matter? With a resounding “yes!” these students tell us about the powerful impact our teaching has had on their lives.

However, the repetitive rhythms of our profession (term after term, we prepare and deliver courses, mark assignments, and meet with students) can sometimes lead any of us to lose sight of teaching’s importance. That is why I want to use student experiences to anchor this talk about teaching’s significance: sustaining the idealistic beliefs that led many of us into this profession becomes easier every time we remind ourselves that any class/any comment on an assignment/any remark to a student in our offices may just turn out to be “the one” that becomes a turning point in that student’s life, whether we ever find out about this or not. Good teaching matters, then, because every single teaching moment engages with possibility and so may affect student futures in ways we may never have imagined and may never even realize.

To support this view, I’ll offer just a few examples from my own experience,

beginning with some students whose academic struggles while they were in my classes led me to assume my teaching was not having much effect. After graduating, however, one wrote to say that “I was in school because I knew it was something I ‘had’ to do. . . . your enthusiasm and love for literature . . . drove me to actually wanting to learn for myself and not because it was something I should do.” Another just “had” to let me know that listening to his favourite indie rock band one afternoon had made him realize, “I’m thinking about your poetry class all of the time now whether I mean to, or not.” A third joined the workforce after finishing his MA, fed up with academia, but more recently wrote, “I was in Thailand and Cambodia I thought a lot about your class while I was there . . . seeing the real Killing Fields” (we had studied a novel including this subject years before); he is now finishing his doctorate. Such notes help me remember that although teaching rhythms may seem strike us as “routine,” teaching results may be anything but, since students may use our teaching in innovative ways to further their own learning long after they have left our classes.

Other student comments have reminded me that teaching also matters for a very different reason: because what we do inside the classroom as teachers can change--sometimes dramatically--what students do outside the classroom with their own lives. For instance, a young woman who planned to become an artisanal

soap-maker signed up for the single introductory English course that she had to take as part of her applied degree. To her surprise, she flourished academically, and a few years later she wrote, "I've been admitted to UC Santa Cruz to do my Ph.D.! Without your encouragement early on, I'm sure you know, I don't think it would have occurred to me to have an academic career, so I always think of writing you first when things like this happen." Yet another talented young woman dropped out of our graduate program, thus becoming a statistical "failure" in Departmental records. However, a few years later she contacted me with the reassurance that her departure had not been a case of ending in failure, but of beginning in hope. According to her, my comments on her assignments had given her the courage to embark on the career she truly wanted and was now happily pursuing, not as an academic but in social work and overseas development.

We may find out only by accident that our teaching has made a difference. For example, while dining with colleagues during an Alberta conference, I had a chance encounter with a former student. He startled all the other diners by dramatically asking me to stand up. He then gleefully announced to all around that he was happily embarked upon his third career--all because this professor's comments about his essays had given him the confidence to continually launch himself into new professional territory. (I had merely helped him with his writing skills.) My final and most startling example to support the view that teaching really does matter occurred at another conference. A fellow panelist introduced herself by saying that a close friend had told her that the only thing that had stopped him

from committing suicide in his troubled first year was our introductory English class, which had given him something to hang on to, day by day. (He was now happily settled in life and career, and when he saw that she was going to be on a panel with me he had asked her to tell me his story and to joke that this proved how important my routine insistence on class attendance was!)

We cannot predict when our teaching might make a difference to our students' lives, or in what ways, or for which students. But as all the above examples show (and they are only a few of many), as teachers we must never lose faith in the belief that teaching *does* matter to students (and we must focus on this belief even when --and perhaps especially when--there is no *immediate* evidence to support this view). Of course, as a "pragmatic idealist" I recognize that I cannot expect to stimulate every student with every comment I offer, but I remain convinced that teaching *can* make a difference in the life of *every* single student, even though I am not capable of judging beforehand *which ones* might be affected--or when or how. All I can be sure of is that by reaching out to *all* students, I will be continually delighted to see out *how many* students of every type *reach back* --sooner or later.

So I have no doubt that good teaching really does matter to students. However, I confess I remain perplexed about what on earth "good" teaching actually is and whether I am ever achieving it in any given situation. All I can say on this part of the topic is that I believe we all strive to teach as well as we can, in all our differing and individual ways. So I will offer here a brief description of some of my own

teaching practices and the reasoning behind them, laying bare some of my own striving.

For me, teaching is both holistic and personal: I want to teach the whole subject, the whole student, and the whole class. I also want to teach “authentically,” that is, to teach *from* who I am and to *reach out to* who my students are as individuals. I believe that for *teaching* to matter to my students, *learning* about my students has to matter to me. So I try to find out about their various interests through an early survey with both academic and personal questions. Then I work at learning how to make “boring” punctuation more interesting to students through the use of sites like <oatmeal.com> (it has a hilarious but accurate discussion of the semicolon, “The Most Feared Punctuation Mark on Earth”). I have also learned to appreciate the joy inherent in responding to the *uniqueness* of each student’s work, so that helping students turn D-F papers into passes offers me as much personal and professional satisfaction as helping them develop A+ papers into better A+ papers.

Of course I recognize that I cannot *make* students learn. However, simply by defining teaching as being about creating the conditions in which students of every type have the opportunity to flourish, I can contribute to an environment in which they might *choose* to learn. As well, since for me teaching is collaboration in “joyful dialogue” (the opportunity to share one’s fascination with and knowledge of a subject with others while hearing *their* views in return), I can also develop teaching strategies to encourage student investment and engagement in the course. For instance, I incorporate practices that build actual

dialogue into the course structure, such as in-class strategies like Designated Speakers, a formal lead-off speaking system that rotates through the class-list at least 3 times a term, guaranteeing that I and the rest of the class will regularly hear the views of *all* students, from the shyest to the most extroverted. I also use out-of-class dialogue strategies, such as an exercise I call Rants & Raves (students send me 3 brief but passionate e-mails attacking/defending any aspect of the course material and receive brief, personalized replies in return).

Grateful as I am for receiving this teaching award--and I am grateful, believe me, because such recognition reinforces my conviction that teaching really does still matter to many people, beyond students--I believe that in the end only my students can truly judge whether or not I have offered them “good” teaching that mattered in their lives.

A few weeks ago, a student I taught nearly 20 years ago e-mailed me out of the blue to say that a single comment I had made on an essay had steered him towards his current successful career as the owner of a small creative business: “This was a defining moment for me and I have never looked back So you see, you made that observation and here I am with 20 some odd people and their children and families ... along the road to here touching thousands and feeding, clothing, and growing people.... So through the six degrees of separation, I thank you for those people who owe YOU more than me.” His message began with the standard “I don’t know if you remember me, but” I did indeed remember him, but I had no idea that my teaching had made a difference in

his life.

With more demands on our time today than ever, it is understandable that as teachers we might sometimes feel overwhelmed and tempted to ask ourselves if all the effort is worth it, if teaching still matters in any way, to anyone, anymore. But most of us entered this profession because once upon a time we did believe that our excitement about our research and our belief in student possibilities could make a difference in this world. And the fact that you have made time to be at this conference and to be in this room demonstrates to me that you all still know in your hearts that good teaching does matter: it does make a difference in students' lives and, through them, in the world. So to you, my colleagues, I say, if ever you wonder whether your labours actually achieve anything, please recall the student

messages I have mentioned today and realize that there are former students of yours thinking similar thoughts, even if they have not yet contacted you to let you know.

Although we may not be able to predict precisely *when* our teaching might make a difference to our students' lives, or in *what* ways, or for *which* students, the overall outcome of good teaching is predictable: it can help students change their lives. *So please continue to believe that what you do every day is important, because your students already know it is, and they are counting on you to think it is as well.*

Realizing that good teaching matters to students—*enormously*—can help keep it mattering to us, too. The moment we stop believing that our teaching matters, it won't.

The Importance of Good Teaching

by

Dr. Jane Magrath

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Thank you to the AAU selection committee for the honour of this award, and to you for the privilege of speaking to you this evening.

When she heard about my AAU Award, my younger sister laughed. “Did the committee know about me?” she asked. My sister is 7 1/2 years younger than I am, and this means that she has been “taught” by me her whole life. When we were children, I taught her many useful things that continue to enrich her life: how to be afraid, for example, to eat the ends of bananas—because everyone knows that tarantulas lay their eggs there; how to turn blue, for example, while stuck in a traffic jam in a tunnel in Massachusetts—because everyone knows that if you don’t hold your breath when you go through a tunnel it will collapse on you.

But my sister’s question didn’t refer to the lifetime of “valuable” instruction she’s received from me. It referred to one specific event: the day I taught her to read. By the time my sister turned 4 (I was 11), I was a seasoned teacher with several successful placements behind me. I had taught a motley collection of stuffed animals, first in a school at the end of my bed, then in a shed in the garden; and, finally, in a permanent school-room behind the noisy old oil furnace in the crumbling stone basement in the old house we lived in, in southern Ontario. I’d had my eye on my sister—a kind of sentient stuffed animal—as a teaching prospect for quite some time; but it wasn’t until she

became a bright and precocious 4-year old that I saw her full potential as a student. And one winter day, I decided to test my powers as a teacher by giving her the greatest gift: I decided to teach her to read. I don’t remember the specifics of that day—and, fortunately for her, I don’t think she really does either. But family legend holds that I took her down to my creepy basement schoolroom and refused to let her go upstairs—not for snacks, not to pee, not for anything at all—until she could read a whole page in the early reader I was using as a textbook. My sister learned to read that day—and I’m not sure she’s ever really forgiven me.

I was thrilled with myself—in a few short hours, I had accomplished what real grade-school teachers spent many months doing. But at 11, I failed to see what I hadn’t taught her. While I *had* taught her to put letters together to make meaning, my incredibly *efficient* teaching method had robbed her of the gifts that good teachers give beyond the mechanics of a particular skill set: the *joy* of reading; the transformative potential of “trying on other lives through literature”; the questioning and discovery and critical thinking; and the countless other things good teachers give to their students by teaching in ways that are less efficient than mine were then.

In one of his provocative books on education, David Solway writes: “. . . education was never meant to be *efficient*. It was meant to be difficult, interesting,

pleasurable, errant, prodigal in every respect, transgressive, personal, lengthy, demanding, and hospitable—but not efficient”¹

And, fortunately for my students, I have become a much less *efficient* teacher than I was at 11—a trait I share with the many good teachers I am blessed to work with, who model this *inefficiency* in so many essential and pedagogically significant ways. For example:

- No matter how long we’ve been at this, and how practised we are, it *still* takes us at least 20-minutes to grade an average paper—and we grade a lot of papers each term.
- it takes us an average of 3-10 hours to prepare for every single class we teach, even if we’ve taught the course before: because we do a host of inefficient things like re-reading novels we’ve taught before; like looking for new and innovative ways to teach previously taught material; and like constantly re-jigging our courses to teach new material.
- Throughout the term, we will continually adjust our plans for classes—sometimes even ditching all that careful and time-consuming preparation—in order to respond to the particular students in the course and the particular shape class discussions take.

And good teachers also know that only part of our teaching happens in the class. We often spend considerable time in our offices talking with groups of students and with individuals. We help with

coursework, and we bounce ideas. But we also just *talk* with lonely or confused or enthusiastic students; we provide informal academic counselling, and (especially if we’re women), we tend to provide informal front-line personal counselling—a significant, if silent, contribution to student retention. And because of this, all those other time-consuming things we do—like grading and preparing classes—rarely happen within the hours we spend on campus—instead, they take place in our evenings and weekends during the term.

Atlantic universities have a large number of really good teachers. We see this in the number of national, regional, and local awards our faculty hold; but we also see it in the significant number of really, really fine teachers we all know who haven’t yet been recognized with an award—teachers who transform the lives of their students by embracing a wide variety of pedagogies and practices that are “difficult, interesting, pleasurable, errant, prodigal in every respect, transgressive, personal, lengthy, demanding, and hospitable—but not efficient.”

And this *inefficiency* is why good teaching—something absolutely essential to universities—is, in the 21st-century, with the drive towards the corporatization of universities and its inherent push towards efficiency, often oddly at odds with the mandates of universities and with the focus of administrators. And this is why new policies and procedures—made at the administrative level and usually *without* consultation with teaching faculty—can *hinder* good teaching—ironically undermining the very purpose of the university in the name of making the university more purposeful.

A quick example:

- Our university has a particular lounge that faculty have traditionally made use of for special, innovative teaching that cannot be done in their regular classrooms: for various displays, and for presentations to which members of the larger PEI community are also invited, for example. One of the wonderful things about this space was that it could be booked directly by faculty—often with relatively short notice—and that tables and chairs could be brought into the room to make it work for a wide variety of events. Recently, though, a complicated new policy has been implemented which ultimately means that while faculty can still book the room, their departments will be charged for each table and chair that is brought into the room. Naturally, this new policy means that faculty will not be using the room as they have done and that the many innovative and enriching activities will no longer be available to students.

These kinds of decisions are made all the time by university administrators—not because they're trying to have a negative impact on good teaching, but because they're trying to make their universities as efficient as possible in difficult, corporate times. But these kinds of decisions—about space, about classroom space; about teaching schedules; about timetabling; about class sizes DO affect—and sometimes negatively—good teaching, and our ability to provide the best, most creative, most meaningful education for our students.

I'm not idealistically suggesting, here, that we can ignore the zietgeist or magically transport ourselves back to some idyllic pre-corporate time; but I am suggesting the need to recognize and acknowledge this gap between efficiency and good teaching and to find ways to support and encourage the sometimes inefficiency of good teaching. And one of the easiest, simplest, and most efficient ways to do this is to *consult—to talk with and really listen to*—good teaching faculty about issues, decisions and policies that might have an impact—no matter how small—on their teaching.

The inevitable corporatization of universities often means a growing distance between administration and faculty. But, if we value our students and the quality of their education, we need to fight to bridge this distance and work together to protect good teaching and to support good teachers. And we need to do this because it's in that powerful relationship between faculty and students—in that dynamic, exciting, transformative (and yes, often *inefficient*) process of education—that we find the essence, the purpose, and the soul of the university.

¹ David Solway. *The Turtle Hypodermic of Sickenpods* (McGill-Queens, 2000) 5.

The Importance of Good Teaching

by

Dr. Brenda Robertson

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I was born in the post war 50's, enjoyed a carefree privileged white middle class childhood during the 60's, and attended university during the early 70's. That is where I learned that developing technology was leading us out of the industrial era into a leisure age where we would all enjoy an abundance of free time. This was exciting news for a wide eyed Bachelor of Recreation student keen to be part of that change.

The world has changed a great deal in the past 35 years. But technology has in fact served to diminish rather than facilitate the leisurely lifestyles I enjoyed as a child, studied as a student, and advocated for throughout my career. As a society we have perhaps never been further from the Greek ideal of leisure (*scholē*) from which the English word school is derived. The Greeks consider leisure to be an ideal state, characterized by a lack of necessity, where one was free to enjoy meaningful and worthwhile pursuits, including the acquisition of knowledge through learning and contemplation.

Rather than access to leisure, we have gained access to information, in fact to an overabundance of information. When I graduated from Acadia in 1975 I felt that I knew everything there was to know about my field. Looking back, I probably did possess a great deal of the limited information that existed at that time, but had only begun to acquire any real knowledge.

So I have been asked to provide personal reflections on the importance of good teaching. It is my belief that at no time in history has the need for good teaching been as great as it is today. For many youth, technology fills any quiet space where knowledge acquisition through deep thinking, critical analysis, and contemplation might occur. Youth are bombarded 24 hours a day with information coming at them literally at the speed of light...though cell phones, blackberries, facebook, myspace, twitter, blogs, utube, the internet, satellite television...all the technology promised in the 70's but not the leisure, not the *scholē*, not the opportunity for contemplation and the pursuit of knowledge ...just access to unbelievable and unconceivable amounts of information.

So, what is good teaching? To me, good teaching involves helping students make their way through the mountains and minefields of information in which they find themselves today, to a place where learning can actually occur. From my perspective, there are three components to good teaching. The first is that as a teacher, I believe that the material I teach is important and somehow matters. Secondly, that what I teach is important for these students to learn. Third, that I care that each student acquires the knowledge...which is an active and engaged process, by both the students as well as the teacher. Sometimes it takes extra ordinary measures in order to help clear away some of the information in order

to create space in lives and in heads of students, so that learning can actually occur.

I remember as a relatively young professor, two years after Acadia received international recognition for adopting the Acadia Advantage laptop program, that I took the rather bold unprecedented step of banning the laptops in my classroom...because I believed they were getting in the way of learning. An aspect of good teaching involves sometimes being brave and standing up for learning! Good teaching begets good learning and the need for brave, knowledgeable young leaders in society has never been greater.

Despite any advantages that may have accrued in recent decades from technological development, society today is plagued with a myriad of conditions that not only threaten our quality of life, but that of future generations as well. Global warming, the health care crisis, areas of escalating violence, cyber crimes, poverty, under employment, aging baby boomers, global recession, terrorism, over work, oil spills, obesity epidemic, dysfunctional families, rural outmigration are but a few of challenges facing society today. The need is great for well educated and engaged youth to lead us through these troubling social, economic, and political times. With such leadership, perhaps someday enhanced leisure lifestyles for all may not only be a possibility but a probability. That is why I believe that good teaching is important!