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# Awards for Excellence in Teaching

## 2011

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**Presentations to the  
Atlantic University Presidents**

**by the recipients of the  
2011 Association of Atlantic Universities**

### **Distinguished Teaching Award**

**Dr. Rosemary Polegato**  
Department of Commerce  
Mount Allison University

**Dr. Maureen Volk**  
School of Music  
Memorial University

### **Educational Leadership Award**

**Dr. David Creelman**  
Department of Humanities and Language  
University of New Brunswick

## The Importance of Good Teaching: Caring Connects Good Teaching to Learning

by

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**W**hat connects good teaching to learning? The answer lies partly in the strong empirical evidence that students respond well when teachers know what they are talking about, when they are prepared, when they communicate well, when they are enthusiastic, when their feedback is valuable, and when they make themselves available for consultation. But what underlies these six qualities, and what makes them so universally accepted as key measures of teaching effectiveness from the perspective of students? Let me suggest that, individually and collectively, these six qualities send the message that a teacher cares not only about the subject matter, but more importantly, about students' learning. In turn, this caring motivates students to care about their learning, too.

Let me be clear that when I speak of "caring," I am not talking about heavy emotional labour or about being on e-mail day and night in case a student wants to make contact at 2:00 am or about joining Facebook or about granting extensions without documentation for serious requests. "To care," according to the Oxford Dictionary online, means to "feel concern or interest," to "attach importance to something." Care is "serious attention or consideration applied to doing something correctly." Caring, then, connects good teaching to learning; it transforms detached consideration of subject matter into humanized, accessible delivery that goes beyond what the discipline tells us - teachers and learners, alike - to consideration of *what it means* to us, our communities, and the world.

Dee Fink in his 2003 book entitled, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*, articulated

what teachers want for their students: to be engaged in course activities, to take away lasting learning, and to make a difference in students' lives. (He read our minds!) To this end, "caring" is one of Fink's six integrated learning outcomes (along with more familiar outcomes, such as foundation knowledge, application, and integration). He challenges us to think about how our teaching can motivate students to care, or care differently, about the phenomenon and ideas they study, about themselves and others, and about the process of learning.

Caring in the university classroom has been under-rated and subject to erosion. Many believe all caring to be the purview of counselling services, health centres, co-curricular activities, and "overly enthusiastic" professors. It is even considered by some to be politically incorrect; "they care too much." Further, in the quest to treat subject matter with rigour and through the lens of analytical research frameworks - to ensure everyone knows that the discipline matters - it is easy to sterilize out the wonder of discovery and enquiry in the classroom.

So what might be left of "caring" that is of importance to teaching and learning? How might caring be expressed in the classroom in a way that supports significant learning? Let me offer some encouragement about how caring for learning can be cultivated in students. To begin, I note that the word "teacher" contains the four letters of the word, "care," and if one likes a more traditional version, each letter can be used to form "careth." I prefer the shorter form, and use each of the four letters below to share my thoughts on caring about learning in university education.

**C is for CONNECT – CONNECT to emotions and people.** I learned a lot about connecting from Dr. Bunbury who taught Organic Chemistry at 8:15 am three times a week to a large class; the full-year course was a requirement for Chemistry majors, pre-med students, nursing students, and Home Economic students. It was challenging subject matter, at times, terrifying. But students were motivated to learn because Dr. Bunbury cared about whether we were “getting it;” he used abundant examples that reflected diverse student interests. He would fly across the board with excitement when he got to what he referred to as the “good part.” During office hours, he would guide us in our own thinking - what part of that elusive chemical structure or formula did we not understand? Dr. Bunbury was also a fixture at the annual Science Fair; he would react with wonder as puffs of coloured “smoke” rose from his concoctions, as though someone else had prepared the carefully orchestrated demonstration, and he was seeing it for the first time. Dr. Bunbury taught me that we need to **CONNECT**.

**A is for ACCESS – ACCESS to the richness of environments around us.** Most teachers have been influenced by the concept of standardization, the notion that every student needs to know everything, know it in the same way (from a specific teacher), and take the same test. It is the typical “one-size-fits-all-or-not-at-all” approach, and standardized testing (suitable in some contexts) has reinforced the practice. But we all know this approach leaves too many students disengaged. Zundel and Deane (2010) suggest that we can involve others in helping students learn – their peers, community members, other learning institutions, and themselves. Environments outside the classroom expand our teaching resource base. For example, a few years ago, I started looking for an alternative to replace my typical three-hour exam for Consumer Behaviour. I’ve settled on a 40% Consumer Ritual Project as the alternative; students identify a ritual in their behaviour that is tied to consumer purchases. Each 25-page

project is unique - because each student’s ritual is unique. But to make sense of their rituals, each student must go through *the same process* of analysis to draw out relevant ideas, theories, and frameworks from the course and from their discoveries through required library research. Through this alternative exam, students **ACCESS** not only the library, but also social and community situations, such as snowmobile races, Chinese New Year celebrations, and their own apartments.

**R is for REFLECT- REFLECT on what is learned.** Students are often required to reflect in some way on their studies. Assignments, with critical thinking at the core, have been in our repertoire since universities began. Journaling is a more recent approach to reflection. But how can we move towards regularly including the affective – the feeling aspect - as well as the rational aspect – in reflection, and how do we move towards holistic reflection rather than piecemeal reflection? There has been success with guided reflection for students through Course Learning Portfolios; students, in effect, are given the opportunity to be actively engaged and responsible for the assessment of their learning in a whole course or in their program. We need to learn more about how to encourage students to **REFLECT** on their learning.

**E is for EDUCATE – EDUCATE for the future.** Bass and Good (2004) pointed out that the word “education” has two Latin roots: *educare*, which means to train or mold, to preserve the past by passing it down to the next generation of learners. It is characterized by foundational knowledge and learning is directed from the front of the classroom. Learners are nurtured to understand and carry on what is known. The other Latin root, *educere*, means to lead out, to elicit, to consider context and change. Learning is directed by the learner; the learner questions and challenges. Learners get to know themselves as independent thinkers, to be intentional about learning, and to care about themselves, others, and the fruits of their

learning.

Clearly, students need to have a chance to be responsible for their own learning, to have a role in leading their way into the future. The world they face is vastly more unpredictable than the world that *so favoured* the *educare* aspect of university education. Students need to be awakened to their own interests and values, to follow their curiosity, to be creative, and to connect to the world around them. Indeed, asking students to be responsible for themselves as learners is in conflict with teaching approaches that are based primarily on the *educare* root of education; a dose of *educere*, perhaps through experiential learning components, is needed to provide a balanced education. Caring, then, means that we need to **EDUCATE** *about* the past and *for* the future.

I invite you to continue to support, in whatever way you can, teaching and learning environments that care about learning and learners. We all want students to be concerned about their studies, to take pride in the work they produce independently and with others, and to rise to the occasion of a challenging assignment. So **CARE** with abundance – look for ways for you and your students to **CONNECT** to the subject matter, to **ACCESS** off-campus

environments, to **REFLECT** on learning, and to be fully **EDUCATED**. Our world of teaching and learning is not a perfect world, but it *is* built on ideals – and one of those ideals should be caring about learning.

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## The Importance of Good Teaching

by

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I was first attracted to the idea of teaching at a university because it offered a steady income for doing the thing I really loved—playing the piano. Having to do some teaching in return seemed like a small price to pay. Although both my parents had been educators, I had no formal training as a teacher. So when I arrived at Memorial University, I was starting from scratch. Looking back, there are many things I wish I had known then. Here are a few:

1. I wish I had known a lot more about piano pedagogy, since that is the area in which I have done the largest part of my teaching. Music teachers tend to teach the way they were taught, and it is only in the last 20 years or so that a more scientific understanding of piano technique has emerged. In particular, the work of Dorothy Taubman and the collection of work known as Body Mapping have revolutionized my understanding of the anatomy and physiology of playing, and have made piano lessons much more productive and exciting. I sometimes think I should issue recall notices to my past piano students to correct the mistaken - and sometimes harmful - technical ideas that I passed on to them before I knew better.
2. I wish I had done some reading about teaching and learning in general before I started teaching. Two of the best books I have read are by Stephen D. Brookfield: *The Skillful Teacher* and *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*.

*The Skillful Teacher* offers suggestions for surviving the experience of college teaching and avoiding typical risks such as "becoming crucified on the cross of imagined perfectability, aspiring to a fruitless

martyrdom, and falling victim to a cynical pessimism." Another chapter is entitled "Overcoming Resistance to Learning", in which he describes some of the main reasons students resist learning, among them fear of the unknown, the danger of committing cultural suicide, and grieving for lost certainties.

Brookfield's insight into the emotional aspects of teaching and learning was revelatory to me. I started out focusing on what I was teaching. He made me think about who I was teaching.

3. I wish I had known more about human psychology. Close to 20 years ago, I was introduced to Myers-Briggs personality theory, which I found extremely helpful in understanding both myself and others more sympathetically and without judgment. It helped me understand that every strength is the flip side of a weakness and every weakness is the flip side of a strength. Students need opportunities to play to their strengths, along with challenges that require them to build competence in weaker areas.

Myers-Briggs theory has also helped me understand how personal preferences can affect learning directly and indirectly. For example, the "guess and check" method is an essential problem-solving tool in many fields, including the aural skills courses that I teach, and trusting our hunches is essential in timed tests where speed and fluency are valued. But students who are most comfortable dealing with information in a step-by-step way may be very uncomfortable if asked to guess or to depend on a hunch. They think it's really stupid to write down the first thing that comes to mind. Being able to

imagine the discomfort they feel has helped me get past my annoyance at their apparent intransigence and forced me to look for teaching strategies that reduce the risk and potential for embarrassment that they associate with guessing.

4. I wish I had had children of my own before I started teaching. Raising children is one of nature's great ways of teaching us empathy. Watching my own children develop and seeing how they learned made me fascinated by the learning process. And seeing my children deal with a range of teachers throughout their school years made me more sensitive to the way I was treating my students. Parenting and teaching - and administration - all involve trying to get other people (our children, our students, our colleagues) to do what we want them to do. Those skills are highly transferable.
5. I wish I had been more aware of the degree to which many students miss out on implicit knowledge, things that I take so much for granted that it never occurred to me to explain them. Faculty tend to be people who have a "knack" for their discipline - much of it came easily to us, especially in the early stages of study. Many of our students don't have the same facility as we did when we were their age. Sometimes it's because they are missing a few key pieces of the puzzle that seem obvious to us. We need to try to see the problem as the student perceives it, even though that can be a distinctly unpleasant thought exercise. When I try to imagine what it would be like to hear music as a "wall of sound", as many students do, without being able to distinguish pitch, rhythm and harmony, it makes me physically uncomfortable. But the exercise helps me imagine what a student might need in order to begin to listen analytically.
6. I wish I had started using midterm feedback forms much sooner. Midterm feedback gives me a chance to solve problems for the

current class instead of benefitting only next year's class, who might not have the same concerns.

I have used a short questionnaire developed by Robert Boice (*The New Faculty Member*, 1992). Boice suggests having a couple members of the class compile the results and present them to you before the next class. Then take a few minutes in class to discuss the results. Thank the students for any positive comments and tell them you will try to keep doing the things that work. Then address the most common suggestions for improvement. Some changes may not be possible to make—explain why. But there will almost always be at least one or two small adjustments you can make.

There are other questionnaires available if you prefer questions that focus more directly on student learning. Students appreciate being heard and Boice says that there is evidence that soliciting midterm feedback leads to better scores on teaching evaluations at the end of the term.

7. Most of all, I wish I had understood how destructive the word "should" is when thinking and talking about students. We have all heard (and probably made) complaints like:
  - "They should know this before they get to my class." The reality is that they don't know it, so what am I going to do about it?
  - "They should be able to do this by now." Reality: They can't, so how am I going to make sure that they can by the time they finish my course?
  - "They should be studying more." Reality: They aren't. Why not? Do they have to work to support themselves? How many other courses are they taking? How much of the work I'm asking for is really

essential? How can I motivate them to work harder? Or maybe help them work smarter?

- “These students shouldn’t be in university.” Reality: They are, and we have to help them develop the knowledge and skills they need.

“Should” is a way of denying reality. It prevents us from finding out what students actually need from us. You have to confront the problem as it is or you will be trying to solve the wrong problem.

After 32 years, I still find teaching fascinating because there are so many more things yet to learn. Here are some of the things I still wish I knew:

1. I wish I knew how to simplify the learning process for my students. The most exciting thing in teaching is when you can help a student find a solution that makes something that was difficult suddenly easy. For example, I now have so many more tools for problem-solving in my piano students’ lessons. But I think that many times I use those tools inefficiently because it’s hard to figure out exactly which one a student needs at a given time. I wish I could understand exactly how they are thinking and what they are feeling, so it would be easier to zero in on the solution that will work most effectively and the most quickly, instead of throwing paint at the wall and seeing what sticks.
2. I wish I could be more aware of how students interpret what I say and do. For example, if you tell a piano student to “relax”, 99% of them will interpret that word as “collapse”. I find that I can say the same thing over and over in as many different ways as I can think of, and still find out in a student’s fourth year that they thought I didn’t really mean exactly “that”, that I only wanted them to think of it as “sort of that” or “as if that”.
3. Finally, I wish I could be half as creative as my students. For example, I often tell my piano students to imagine their arms falling through jello as they descend to the keys. One day this fall I arrived at my weekly studio class to see an array of plastic glasses full of red Jello with a sign reading “Arms Falling Through Jello”. On closer inspection, I realized that suspended near the top of each glass was a small doll’s arm. My students had pulled the forearms off old Barbie dolls and suspended them in Jello to show me that this time they had understood me. They’ve set the bar very high, and I’m glad I still have a few more years to reach for it.

## Four Things, Important to Teaching

by

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The tradition, on the occasion of this dinner of the Council of Presidents, has been to ask AAU award recipients to speak about the importance of good teaching, in ten minutes or less. I hope the person who first thought up this assignment chuckled, knowing that it would be good fun to watch academics struggle with such a Herculean task. And it is, I think, a very good strategy. Everyone who receives such honours should be immediately reminded that whatever we might call teaching, it is too profound a field and vast a practice to be encompassed either by our words or even our efforts. But even so... let me make my own attempt to speak about the nature of good teaching. I've often wanted to say these four things. I doubt I'll get a better chance than is afforded me here.

On the importance of good teaching? Perhaps we might need to think about the *"absolute necessity of good teaching."* Aristotle observed, in *"The Poetics,"* that the *"instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons."* He goes on to say that, *"imitation, then, is one instinct of our nature...[and] to learn gives the liveliest pleasure."* More than twenty-three hundred years ago he wrote these words. Isn't he right? We are creatures who learn all the time and for our whole lives. People love to learn and the instinct to reach beyond ourselves is deeply rooted. For good and sometimes - in nightmarish ways - for ill, we copy each other, learn from each other, fall in line behind each other, and sometimes try to convince others to imitate us. It is at the core of our nature to absorb and learn, and only when we are profoundly ill - depressed or approaching death - do we lose this capacity. Even then, we watch it slip away from our fellows

with a deep sense of grief. We will always be learning and we will always be teaching, modeling, speaking. It is not just important, it is necessary that we learn and teach to the very best of our ability.

Therefore, I think the best teaching emerges when we act as teachers just as we would wish to act whenever we are trying to be our better selves. Good teaching occurs when we follow the core laws of our species. We do best when we try to be fair, merciful, and kind.

We teach well when we try to be fair. Yes, we must impart, as best we can, some part of what we know to others and then hold them accountable to a standard. Inevitably our standards will be flawed and incomplete. We will make mistakes in our judgments. But if we do our best to be fair and honest as we deal with our students, they will understand that we are trying to help them. And they do need our help as they begin to make themselves accountable to a vast world that wants and desperately needs the very best they have to offer.

We teach well when we are merciful. Though we view our communities through our own distinct lens, people are curious; we long to expand our own views of the world. Humans have an innate, instinctual need to push a beyond the boundaries that confine and define us, and for our students that can be scary and difficult process. It is a risky thing to let go of what you thought you knew and grasp hold of a new idea. We do well to be patient with our students and to extend them second chances and multiple opportunities. They are on a hard road. We do well to be merciful not only with them, but with each other as teachers and administrators as we explore new ideas and experiment with new techniques.

We teach well when we are kind. We are exactly like our students; continually remembering, learning, forgetting, rediscovering, and clarifying. Teaching is the art of kind connection. If you ask a teacher what they love about being in the classroom, most will speak about one thing; the joy of helping someone as they learn. When we watch someone expand their world a little bit and we've helped them do it, there are few greater joys. As we share in their joy, we owe it to them and to ourselves to approach those moments with a sense of welcome and kindness.

And finally, we teach well if we honour each other's freedom. As learners we did not go exactly where we were expected to. We entered into our disciplines, made them our own, and then started to add to them in ways that we discovered were worthwhile and exciting. Our students will make their own way. As much as possible, I want to set up opportunities through which people can share their ideas, discover their abilities, and hone their skills. Though the forces of modernity continuously try to convince us that "all alone is all we are," our daily experience within our classrooms tells us that this is not true. We are at our best when we encounter and connect with each other. We can only do this if we give each other room and opportunities to move.

This fall is my twentieth year at UNB in Saint John. I am a bit surprised to be half way through my life as a teacher and still feeling as if I am beginning. I'm just beginning to see how much our students can achieve, how interesting and diverse my colleagues' teaching practices are, and how surprisingly flexible and malleable university systems can be when they are challenged and encouraged to change. As we encourage each other's freedom with a sense of fairness, mercy, and kindness, even healthier learning environments are going to continue to emerge around us.

As I conclude, I want to thank the Association of Atlantic Universities for the honour of this award. I have met many of the other teachers who have

been similarly recognized. I have learned from them and I admire their work. I'm deeply honoured to be connected with them. And I am not receiving this award as an individual self: I am actually standing in for a group of teachers at the University of New Brunswick, in Saint John, who have worked wonderfully hard for more than a decade to foster a thriving teaching culture on our campus. Lucy Wilson, Judy Buchanan, and Kate Frego, Ken Craft and Sandra Bell, Dale Roach, Lisa Best, and Beth Keyes, and more than a dozen other people on our University's teaching committee and in my home department have a rightful claim to this award. I am deeply grateful for their friendship. And I wouldn't be a teacher at all, but for the encouragement of my wife Gina, who keeps reminding me to state my point and trust in silence. So I will.