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Awards for Excellence in Teaching

2012

**Presentations to the
Atlantic University Presidents**

**by the recipients of the
2012 Association of Atlantic Universities**

Distinguished Teaching Award

Dr. Colin Laroque
Department of Geography and Environment
Mount Allison University

Dr. Neil Maltby
Gerald Schwartz School of Business
St. Francis Xavier University

Educational Leadership Award

Dr. Heather Sparling
Department of History and Culture
Cape Breton University

The Importance of Good Teaching

by

Dr. Colin Laroque

Department of Geography and Environment
Mount Allison University

I'd like to thank the AAU for the great honour of the Distinguished Teaching Award, and especially thank them for inviting me to speak about the importance of good teaching. Not everyone is a good teacher, but we all continue to be learners each day of our lives. This is why I think the subject needs to be discussed, and discussed some more, especially in a room full of people whose jobs depend on reaching out to the learners. To do this, I would like to share with you a story about me. A story from my past that I keep in my mind every time I teach a course to a new group of students.

When I was younger, there was no more special treat than eating my grandmother's fresh baking. The thought of her cookies, buns, fresh bread, all still make my mouth water to this day, but at the top of my favourite list was her fresh bannock. Eventually when I grew up and moved out on my own, the reality of cooking for myself hit me. I actually turned out to be a decent cook, as I found I could methodically follow the instructions in recipes quite well. Then I got the bright idea to try to duplicate Grandma's bannock recipe.

I made a special trip to Duck Lake to see her during a weekday when her house would be quiet. I felt I could quickly assemble her recipe and I'd be sampling some wonderful fresh bannock in mere minutes. We started the baking process and it quickly became apparent that her "recipe" could not be mechanically recorded by paper and pen. Once I put my pen down, she told me to wash my hands and then we'd start. Only then did I begin to learn the secrets of her baking. I mixed the dough, and she added the ingredients. My fingertips began to know what too much water felt like, my palms to know when there was too much flour. By the end of the

session, she had taught me her most valuable recipe ingredient: the feeling of getting the mix "just right." She said, "Each ingredient alone is fine, but it is together in the proper mix where the magic occurs. Only by paying attention to the feel of the ingredients together will you find the secret to your own bannock."

I have kept these words in my head and heart for many years now. I have used this wisdom many times in my teaching, especially when I alter an individual ingredient in a course that already seems to have a good mix. I am constantly interacting with my students to get a feel for how things are working, how my latest mix tastes. And by slightly altering the amount of a new ingredient, I try to come away with a more successful course than all of the previous iterations. I spend considerable time trying to get the ever-changing recipes of my courses to feel "just right." Although written feedback is useful in this regard, I rely most heavily on the spoken word.

My courses are in essence a conversation from start to finish, but the communication never ends when the final exam is over. I continue to talk to my students, letting time pass and allowing them to digest the course in retrospection. It is usually in the summer, talking frankly to my summer students, when the mix of my previous term's recipe is truly critiqued. Dialogues about what I changed in the course, and blunt back-and-forth feedback on how it was received, are often more critical in shaping my courses than the one or two sentences that students provide in a written evaluation. This shaping of my next year's courses progresses from the daily dialogues with my four or five closest students in the summer, to fireside chats with 15 to 20 upper-year

students at my fall field course. Sitting around a campfire in a wondrous far-away environment provides students with an interesting freedom that generates a lot of ideas on how they appreciate being taught and what they want to learn. In these breakout campfire groups, the sky is the limit, and it is from these sessions that I learn the most. Often both positive and constructive negative feedback is generated about me and my classes. But just as likely, I will learn in an extremely candid manner what Professor X did that was great, or what Professor Y did that decidedly wasn't. Both modes of criticism are extremely important learning moments for me. And because such conversations with students, once initiated, can continue over a long time, this feedback keeps coming to me as students progress throughout their academic careers. In this way, my recipes for teaching are constantly being amended by

my most hungry minds, my current and recent students.

And this brings me to the thought I'd like to leave you with, perhaps my take-home message. I think good teachers are much like good cooks: never quite satisfied with the last meal they prepared, and always open to suggestions. A good teacher should amplify students' innate curiosity, and provide them with the tools and enthusiasm that enable them to be—to really want to be—a lifelong learner, whether in the teacher's own field of study or in any other. Teacher and student alike will then know something of the memorable taste of a spectacular batch of bannock...while also knowing that there is still room to strive to make it perfect.

The Importance of Good Teaching: The Educational Entrepreneur

by

Dr. Neil Maltby

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When it comes to investing, entrepreneurs are the great investors in our world. They often start with very little, take an idea and realize it into something of greater value, and create so much for so many in society. Many of the innovations in our world come from entrepreneurs. Arguably, the entrepreneurial spirit can be linked to the driving force of teaching and learning; that is, good teaching and learning require educational entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurs are individuals who create and seize opportunities or situations of potent value. They take basic inputs and turn them into better outputs that meet the needs or wants of some group. Entrepreneurs are not just merchants of commercial value; they are the embodiment of values like creativity, drive and independence. Beyond launching and growing a business and making a contribution to society, entrepreneurs are the economic facilitators of choice – choice as action and choice as ideology. This forms the heart of the entrepreneurial spirit.

For example, a Nova Scotia woman has developed a new line of perfume based on oils supplied from devastated economies like Afghanistan and Haiti. She has changed the industry with an innovative approach to buying material from primarily women-supplied sources and in doing so providing a commercial alternative for women in Afghanistan and the poppy trade. This represents a compelling demonstration of value, values and the entrepreneurial spirit.

It is this same entrepreneurial spirit that drives the transformation of good students by good teachers. In many ways both entrepreneurs and teachers create and disseminate things of value. The true teacher and student must be obsessed

with opportunities for gaining intellectual value, thoroughly studying extant knowledge and finding gaps, exploring and pursuing innovative intellectual development often by examining a topic from a different perspective, and sharing the body of knowledge old and new with others in the academic community.

Effective teachers are the role models of educational entrepreneurs – curious and creative, attentive to rigorous standards and driven to work hard so students will follow the lead. Educational entrepreneurs seize opportunities in and out of the class, course, semester and program to help students transform themselves. The entrepreneurial spirit forms the essence of teaching, and it also forms the essence of the satisfaction gained from teaching – investing in students.

The Importance of Good Teaching

by

Dr. Heather Sparling

Department of History and Culture

Cape Breton University

I hope you will indulge me a little in my few minutes with you. It's a true honour to be speaking here, and to have received the Anne Marie MacKinnon Educational Leadership Award. I was asked to speak about good teaching, but as the recipient of the educational leadership award, based in part on my involvement in developing new courses and programs at CBU, I'd like to speak about good curriculum instead, and particularly about the role and future of arts programs in Atlantic Canadian universities.

But before I do that, I want to tell you a story. I promise that it is relevant.

In December 1989, a freighter from New Caledonia, a francophone community located 800 miles east northeast of Australia, was travelling the Cabot Strait when a vicious storm arose. Several ships went down that night. The New Caledonian freighter, called Captain Torres, lost its engines. It drifted among waves 50 feet high, in winds blowing 60 or 70 knots, and in temperatures well below freezing. When the crew realized that their ship would go down, they radioed the Coast Guard and requested that each of the twenty-three crew members be patched through to call home. They calmly took turns making two minute phone calls to their loved ones, saying goodbye.

The award-winning author Silver Donald Cameron gives this story a few paragraphs in his book, *Wind, Whales and Whiskey: A Cape Breton Voyage*. James Keelaghan, a well-known Canadian folksinger, later learned of this story which inspired a song. I'd like to play you an excerpt.

4:59 [[play "Captain Torres"](#)]

OPTIONAL: If you're wondering why you never heard about this story before, it's because it happened on the same night as the Montreal Massacre, which eclipsed all other news stories. For Keelaghan, the two stories resonated. On the one hand was a story of the worst in men: a man who feared and therefore killed women. On the other was a story of the best of men: twenty-three men who, in the face of disaster, thought of their families and calmly lined up to say goodbye to them. For Keelaghan, his song illustrates that most times, in extreme circumstances, people exhibit the best of human nature rather than the worst.

I don't know how you are all feeling after hearing that song, but it regularly brings me to tears, even after listening to it dozens of times. My, and perhaps your, visceral, physical reaction to Keelaghan's song is the power of the arts. I'm sure you all know cognitively, intellectually that the arts are powerful, but I think it's sometimes helpful not just to know it, but to feel it. And this is also the value of the arts: knowing not just with our minds, but through our bodies. The arts open up different ways of understanding the world.

When I speak of the arts, I don't only mean the creative arts of music, dance, drama, and visual art, but the arts of the humanities and social sciences too. They invite us to think of our worlds in creative ways, which our region surely needs in this age of uncertainty: economic, religious, ethical, social, cultural, and political uncertainty. The arts offer paths to learning about unfamiliar others, leading to greater compassion, empathy, and understanding. This is so urgent on a global level, of course, but also relevant close to home, in our universities where local students are encountering ever greater numbers of international students, and where international students want to learn not just a

discipline, but about Canadian life and culture.

Again, I fully expect that this is all completely familiar territory. But sometimes we stop seeing familiar territory for its familiarity. Atlantic Canadian faculty are very fortunate in this time of declining populations on Canada's east coast, and particularly a declining youth population, that you, our universities' presidents, have found ways to protect our universities by developing and expanding increasingly popular programs in business, science, health, and technology, programs that have far-reaching impacts not just on our region but, thanks to growing international student populations and the success of our local graduates, throughout the world. I'm grateful for those programs that keep our universities healthy and vibrant. They are essential because all good universities need a variety of programs, in the same way that strong communities need citizens with wide-ranging skills and expertise.

But where are the arts in the future of Atlantic Canadian universities? Yes, all Atlantic Canadian universities have long-established and well-developed arts programs. But our arts programs are also experiencing a precipitous decline in students.

So here's my point: Atlantic Canadian universities are in a unique position to champion the arts. Canada's east coast is known nationally and internationally as an area of great cultural strength and wealth. We produce a ridiculous number of successful artists, and scholars, and powerful speakers, and charismatic leaders. We also attract them. Perhaps some of you are "come-from-aways" yourselves. I am. Silver Donald Cameron is. When I interviewed Keelaghan, a Calgarian, I asked him why so many disaster songs seem to come from Atlantic Canada. I was surprised and intrigued by his answer. He suggested that it was because Atlantic Canada has already had hundreds of years to develop its culture since the arrival of European settlers, whereas Canada's west has had a much shorter history and will require hundreds more years to get to the same cultural

place where Atlantic Canada already is today.

We need business, science, technology, and health programs, absolutely. But we also need healthy arts programs. We in Atlantic Canada have the unique opportunity of becoming leaders in the arts at a time when many institutions are unwilling to invest in them. My point is that good curricula in Atlantic Canadian universities shouldn't just include the arts because of tradition or expectation, but should champion them. Let's forge our own curricular path. Let's build on our region's acknowledged strengths and show the world how the arts can lead the way to a more prosperous, healthy, and happy world. Thank you.