



ASSOCIATION OF
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Awards for Excellence in Teaching

2013

**Presentations to the
Atlantic University Presidents**

**by the recipients of the
2013 Association of Atlantic Universities**

Distinguished Teaching Award

Dr. Brad Cross
Department of History
St. Thomas University

Dr. Russell Wyeth
Department of Biology
St. Francis Xavier University

Educational Leadership Award

Dr. Stephanie Inglis
School of Arts and Social Sciences
Cape Breton University

The Importance of Good Teaching

by

Dr. Brad Cross
Department of History
St. Thomas University

I would like to thank the Faculty Development Committee and the AAU for this award. I also want to recognize Dr. Russell Wyeth and Dr. Stephanie Inglis' achievements, and to thank them, and the other nominees, for all that you contribute to student-learning across the region. Closer to home, I want to thank St. Thomas University for the confidence it showed in me with its nomination for the Distinguished Teaching Award, and to our Learning and Teaching Development Officer, Dr. James Whitehead for his support. At this very hour my colleague, Dr. Karen Robert, is standing-in for me with 120 first-year students enrolled in two sections of the Introduction to World History survey classes, while I am here receiving the citation for this prestigious award. Thanks, Karen. I owe you one. Again.

I share this honour with so many students and colleagues, past and present. I share this with my wife, Christine, and our sons, Adam and Ben, who have sometimes participated in my experiential and service learning activities, who gave me the time and freedom to explore new ways of teaching, both at home and away. I can't thank them enough for their support.

Why do we put such effort into teaching? When I first began teaching university courses, I had no experience designing, let alone delivering, whole courses – I had been a teaching assistant for a few years working with small groups of students in tutorials as well as marking stacks and stacks of essays handed to me by the professor I was assigned. But when I came to have my own courses, there were no TAs and I was more or less making it up as I went along – however detailed the course outline and thick the textbook. Teaching is hard. And it's an

unknown quantity. We are trained in research but much less so in teaching. Recognition for research comes more immediately than teaching, evidenced in publication and grant writing.

Yet I think many of us teach out of a sense of duty – however earnest this sounds. I think that it's one of the main motivations many of us share. Sometimes that duty is very direct – that we want to do our jobs well, and that we owe it to our students. But sometimes I think our sense of duty is more abstract – we teach in the hope that we can prepare our students with the best education we can offer and that in turn they will pay it forward. It is a form of constructive sharing.

In the last decade or so I have come to appreciate teaching as a form of community – with colleagues, with students, and with the larger society around us. My personal involvement with learning communities means that I have sometimes been in the classroom with more than one professor at a time, often from different disciplines. Most of the time these collaborations had their roots in a casual chat about something one of us was struggling with in a course, and ended up resulting in a proposal to link courses together and offer students (and ourselves) an opportunity to work through common questions using different disciplines. Sometimes that collaboration has come when I have partnered with organizations beyond the campus in an effort to put into practice what we are learning in the classroom, and off-campus organizations have been happy to have energetic undergraduate students to help them with their work. For me, service learning and experiential learning have provided outstanding

opportunities for many communities to learn collaboratively.

Sometimes trying new teaching techniques doesn't work. But even a flop is instructive. If you are still convinced it might work, why not make some adjustments and try it again? Letting students know what and why you are trying something different is important. As with the publication process, teaching requires persistence - revision, review, reflection - so there is no guarantee it will work every time. Assessing learning is tricky because it is tempting to read into the results to see what we hoped was happening, rather than what was really happening – parsing narrative course evaluations and justifying low scores on quantitative course evaluations is an art in itself.

Learning takes patience – it is a process for both the student, and for faculty. At the end of a 13 week term, there is a good chance we may not really know what learning happened, beyond the superficial. We are told that about 10,000 hours is required for mastery – so just maybe three hours a week for 13 weeks won't yield absolute knowledge. But with enough patience, learning outcomes may come to the surface. Hearing back from students a decade later, I still am not sure what they learned in my courses, but some of them appreciate the fact that they were engaged in trying to ask good questions and find satisfying answers to them.

In one's own professional development goals there are proscribed milestones – end-of-term marks delivered to students, tenure and promotion ladders, course evaluation data, robust enrollment data, but ultimately I'm selfish in seeking my own professional development as a learner – and I depend on students and colleagues to continue my own learning. My

research programme stems directly from trying to teach difficult concepts in the first year World History survey course. I owe this as much to my teaching as my research interests.

What support do I need to pursue my own teaching development? I need a few simple things. From the institution, I need the room to try out teaching ideas even if they flop. Sure teaching development support is helpful, but so is appreciating the role student course evaluations play in formative feedback for faculty – certainly every university has a standard survey instrument that it employs at the end of term. Yet who is satisfied with it? Do we want to teach to the course evaluation or for our students? Many have wondered aloud how course evaluations are shaped as much by timetable slot and stuffy classrooms as by innovative pedagogy and stimulating work. We need to think about ways of understanding and modifying course evaluations more constructively. Institutions can support teaching collaboration by allowing flexibility –with such matters as timetables, with tentative rather than formally articulated partnerships, and with new course preparation incentives, among other things. As faculty, we can take the initiative to follow up on conversations with colleagues about our teaching, taking risks in collaborating in the classroom (or taking learning outside of the classroom).

But for now, I merely want to thank you for the AAU Distinguished Teaching Award. I am humbled to be counted among the nominees, and honoured to have been chosen as a recipient. Thank you.

The Importance of Good Teaching: The Educational Entrepreneur

by

Dr. Russell Wyeth

Department of Biology

St. Francis Xavier University

I prepared a more informal presentation about my teaching, with no formal script, but that covered the following topics:

Teaching Biology

I teach students how to think like biologists. My goal is to build their abilities to apply critical thinking skills to the living world around them. This involves teaching them how to ask good biological questions and then to understand what a good answer to those questions would be, and how biologists would go about answering those questions. The result of this is that they do exactly what biologists do: pose questions about organisms and then answer those questions. I employ a range of pedagogical techniques and activities to help my students through that process, and in my presentation I highlighted three particular techniques I use in my teaching. I highlight them because my students have provided positive feedback on them and also because they may be at risk in the future. University teaching is changing, both due to pedagogical innovation and external constraints. I felt this was an opportunity to present some ideas to the Atlantic university presidents that they might use as they make decisions about how to foster effective teaching environments at their institutions.

1. Field Trips

In my view, field trips are a critical aspect of teaching biology (and presumably many other subjects). They should not be considered an optional extra that is not strictly necessary to the core of teaching a topic. Field trips are one of the best places to get students to ask the same questions biologists ask. There is nothing like immersing them in the natural world to foster curiosity about that world. Importantly, I do not approach my field trips as show-and-tell experiences for the students where I control the

information being discussed. Instead, I provide minimal guidance, and ask the students simply to explore the field site and ask questions. I always leave time at the end of the trip for a substantial group discussion, where all the students get to mention their questions, and then as a group we brainstorm how those questions could be answered. In my experience, field trips are the ideal place to start students off on the path to approaching the natural world as a biologist. Taken from this perspective, they should not be considered as ancillary to teaching biology, but fundamental.

2. Live Animals

This idea is very simple: in zoology, we need help to present and defend the value of students interacting with live animals. The restrictions on using animals in teaching continue to increase as a result of how Canadian Council of Animal Care (CCAC) regulations are applied at universities. Scant attention is paid to the pedagogical value of interaction with live organisms, with a strong emphasis on replacing live animals with video or other surrogates. My view is this both undermines our ability to teach biology and, in fact, undermines a guiding principle behind the CCAC: valuing animal life. Students do not learn from surrogates the same way they do from live organisms. Consider trying to teach children the many life lessons that come from pet ownership and care through videos. It just won't work as well. The same is true in the biology lab, and in my labs I attempt to maximize students' interactions with live animals. The opportunities for students to generate questions about animals, as well as answer biological questions through observation and experimentation, are very important in their training. Videos and virtual labs simply do not create the same engagement with students as do living organisms, and thereby greatly reduce

zoologists' ability to teach. The pedagogical value of live animals should not be underestimated in considering the ethical use of animals. In the end, I believe students taught solely through surrogates are being short-changed in their biological training and will also come away with far less appreciation of the value of animal life.

3. Technological Innovation

Teaching can always benefit from innovation. New teaching tools are developed all the time. How our students learn changes, affected greatly by changing communication technologies as they grow up. University teaching needs to innovate to be effective in the face of these changes. One of the things I try hard to do in my own teaching is find creative ways to exploit technology to the benefit of my students. One example: I teach 300 first year students the diversity of life. The course covers all groups of organisms found on the planet today. I use my university's online learning content management system (Moodle) to help the students connect the course content to their own lives (and also increase their perception of interaction with me in such a large class). Every week of the semester, students have to encounter a different group of organisms for participation marks. All the students have to do is classify the organism themselves (using the information and terminology they learn in the classroom) and describe the encounter. Their responses are submitted through Moodle, and I exploit the organizational power of this technology to review their responses. I then select a few (interesting encounters, encounters with mistakes, etc.) and present them back to the class. The students get the feeling that I am interacting directly with them. This system, which produces about 3000 responses a semester, would be impossible without the content management system technology (which reduces the work to less than half an hour a week). The broader point here is that technology should not be viewed as a solely structural support for teaching. It should be viewed as inspirational also. University teachers need to be given technology and time with that

technology purely to explore new ways to teach. This can only happen if there is proactive acquisition of new pedagogical technologies to use for exploration and innovation.

In summary, I hope these examples and ideas show both how teaching (biology) can be done in effective and innovative ways. I also hope they spur action towards how the Atlantic universities might foster future excellence in teaching.

The Importance of Good Teaching: An Indigenous Presence within the Academy

by

Dr. Stephanie Inglis
School of Arts and Social Sciences
Cape Breton University

I would like to thank the Association of Atlantic Universities for the honor of receiving the Ann Marie MacKinnon Educational Leadership Award.

I have spent all of my academic career teaching at Cape Breton University (CBU). When I first began working at the university, over two decades ago, there was one course being taught in Mi'kmaq Studies and it was considered "not academic enough" to be a credit course. At that time in the late 1980's, there were only eight Mi'kmaq students enrolled at the University College of Cape Breton now known as Cape Breton University. Nor, at that time were there many Indigenous students graduating from other Canadian academic institutions. Fortunately, twenty-five years later, this has changed.

Cape Breton University now offers over twenty courses in the discipline of Mi'kmaq Studies and is world renown for its development of Integrative Science or Two-eyed Seeing which ties together Indigenous and Western scientific knowledge. Cape Breton University's new Unama'ki College is the home of the Mi'kmaq Language Lab, the Mi'kmaq Resource Center that houses the largest existing collection of secondary documents written by and about the Mi'kmaq, a Mi'kmaq Student Center and the Department of Indigenous Studies. The Principal of Unama'ki College is the nationally recognized Mi'kmaw scholar and member of the Sante' Mawio'mi, Stephen Augustine. There are over two-hundred First Nation students currently attending Cape Breton University making up almost ten percent of the student population.

Does this mean that Cape Breton University has achieved an Indigenous presence within its academy? I would say the answer is only a partial ...Yes. Yes, we have students who are

First Nation and Yes, we have faculty who are First Nation and Yes, finally, we have an academic administrator, the Principal of Unama'ki College, who is an Indigenous scholar but, Nowe do not yet have a truly Indigenous presence at Cape Breton University – nor do most other universities in Canada.

Cape Breton University is closebut not yet totally there. For Indigenous knowledge to be mainstreamed within academia the voice of our Canadian Indigenous academic administrators and faculty must be more fully listened to and their voice must be "the voice" which describes how universities are to move forward as Indigenous knowledge becomes mainstreamed within academic teaching. Universities must not confuse iconographic symbols such as teepees and First Nation student photo-ops as verification of an institutionalized Indigenous presence.

A true Indigenous presence will have been reached only when the strongest academic institutional voices guiding a university's academic framing of Indigenous knowledge are those of Indigenous scholars and when the First Nation administrators who are now working within Canadian universities are truly listened to and more importantly consulted on everything from how the discipline of Indigenous knowledge is to be taught across academic schools to how a university frames the presentation of Indigenous epistemology within that university's public relations material. Not until the voices of our Indigenous academics hold mainstream power within the academy and their advice is followed by key academic administrators will Canada have begun to achieve a real Indigenous presence within academia. Through my being awarded the Ann Marie Mackinnon Educational Leadership Award I feel that Cape Breton University has been acknowledged for its

role in advancing Indigenous knowledge within the academy, but we have much that still needs to be articulated and understood about what institutionalized academic Indigenous knowledge and presence truly means. Your job, as Atlantic Canadian University Presidents, is to continue the dialoguing, listening and learning until all Atlantic universities have a fully institutionalized Indigenous academic voice. I encourage all of you present to take up that challenge and to carry it forward.