

# Association of Atlantic Universities

*Institutional Award Winners Retreat*

*Friday, October 27, 2000*

*Saint Mary's University*

*Halifax, Nova Scotia*

**Faculty Development Bulletin**

**Fall 2000**

**Participants:** Cheryl Bartlett (University College of Cape Breton), Sylvia Hale (St. Thomas University), Rita McKeough (Nova Scotia College of Art and Design), Patricia DeMéo (Dalhousie University), John Schellenberg (Mount Saint Vincent University), Robert Thompson (Mount Allison University), Terry Wagar (Saint Mary's University)

**Facilitator** Roger Moore (St. Thomas University)

## ***Topics of Discussion Inside Bulletin:***

- 1. The Teaching Awards**
- 2. Repeat Award Winners**
- 3. Financial Reward for Teaching Awards**
- 4. Peer Mentoring**
- 5. Skills and Skills Transcript Components**
- 6. Lower Standards in Education**
- 7. Incorporating Technology**
- 8. Faculty Teaching Outside Specialized Areas**

### **1. The Teaching Awards**

The retreat began with recipients describing the activities that had taken place at their own universities after they had received their excellence in teaching award. At St. Thomas, for example, Sylvia Hale had been invited to address incoming students at the September initiation ceremony. In addition, her picture had been placed on the Excellence in Teaching Wall of Fame. Robert Thompson, at Mount Allison, had given a public address, which had been followed by a reception in celebration of his award. Patricia DeMéo described how Dalhousie University had organized a reception, complete with an inspirational talk by Dr. Pat Rogers, President of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education to which ALL award winners at her university were invited. Participants agreed that some form of celebration was essential, not only for award winners, but also for everyone who had been nominated for teaching awards.

These opening comments led directly into a discussion of how the Excellence in Teaching awards had actually been awarded. John Schellenberg described the 3 tier process that takes place at Mount Saint Vincent: students nominate, a committee draws up a short list, and then candidates on the short list are interviewed. St. Thomas, the NS College of Art and Design, and Mount Allison also had candidates nominated by students, although there was support from faculty colleagues at both these institutions. Candidates would draw up a teaching portfolio, and then a committee examined the portfolios of the nominated

candidates. In the case of NSCAD, the wider community was also drawn into the nomination and selection process. There was a brief discussion of how the Association of Atlantic Universities selected their AAU Distinguished Teaching Award winners and Terry Wagar of Saint Mary's described his nomination for and receipt of the National Post Teaching Award for Business Administration: 5 reference letters, support from colleagues and people in industry, and a large submission package prepared by himself and the Office of Instructional Development. Patricia DeMéo described the process at Dalhousie where a broad based committee asked for presentations from Alumni, Faculty, Administration and Students before making their choice. Cheryl Bartlett told how the University College of Cape Breton worked with the Alumni Association to request from each candidate a teaching portfolio and a list of creative activities; finally, statements were solicited from students and colleagues and upon this basis the candidate was chosen.

All present commented on the amount of paperwork necessary to prepare their teaching portfolios and the documentation necessary for supporting their nominations. There was some agreement that the exercise was worthwhile as it allowed candidates to see where they stood with regard to their own teaching, but all agreed it was a great deal of work. At the end of these preliminary discussions all the award winners understood that they had been chosen on merit and although here was still some embarrassment at having been selected, candidates realized that the selection procedure was, in most cases, a reasonably objective one and not just a lottery.

## 2. Repeat Award Winners:

Robert Thompson asked about repeat winners. Were they allowed in the individual universities? Generally speaking, the awards had not been in place long enough for there to be a sense around the table that people could be nominated for a second or third teaching award. The feeling was that there was nothing against a professor being nominated for a second time, however there was consensus that there should be a lapse of time, say five or ten years, before the same names came forward again. At least one person said that they would not let their name go forward a second time as the stress involved first time was too great.

## 3. Financial Reward for Teaching Awards:

It was agreed that with two exceptions financial rewards for winning the university excellence in teaching award were minimal. Prize monies follow:

\$2000	Mount Allison University
\$1000	Saint Mary's University
\$ 500	Nova Scotia College of Art and Design
\$ 150	University College of Cape Breton
zero	St. Thomas University
zero	Dalhousie University
n/a	Mount Saint Vincent University

Sylvia Hale pointed out that at St. Thomas University there were Special Merit Awards in the contract that could be awarded by the administration for research, meritorious service, or teaching excellence; however, the STU Excellence in Teaching Award itself received no financial benefit, just the honor. The group could not agree upon the desirability of financial rewards. Patricia DeMéo emphasized that although she hadn't received any prize money, she would not have expected any. In addition, there was no prize money at Dalhousie for Research Excellence either. Many felt that the honor was sufficient in itself; others felt strongly that unless teaching excellence was compensated to the same extent as research excellence, with travel grants, teaching excellence grants, release time for the scholarship of teaching, and substantial award money, then in spite of claims to the contrary, teaching excellence would always be a poor relation when compared to research excellence. Several people noted that whereas excellent researchers were given release time to do more research, excellent teachers were often expected to teach more classes and put in longer hours. A comment was made that this is why we refer to it as a teaching "load."

## 4. Peer Mentoring:

The facilitator asked the group to describe what, if any, peer mentoring was taking place at the various universities in the region. Patricia DeMéo stated that new initiatives were under way at Dalhousie to enhance the importance of teaching. Teaching Award winners were being invited to act as mentors to younger and newer faculty. There were also teaching workshops and role models were being established for teachers. There was choice and people were not forced to accept peer mentors. There was praise

for the efforts of Alan Wright and Bruce Barton to establish peer mentoring and learning and teaching development.

John Schellenberg described the workshops on the first year experience that had taken place at Medicine Hat when he was there. He said that new faculty in particular were encouraged to join in these workshops. A similar initiative has been undertaken at St. Thomas where a peer mentoring program is also being developed. This will allow junior faculty to meet with senior faculty, especially Excellence in Teaching Award Winners, in an informal and non-threatening format. Robert Thompson described the Friday at Four meetings which take place on a monthly basis at Mount Allison. There is a facilitator and teaching issues are debated. These conversations are often the springboard for interested parties to get together at a later date for further discussion. UCCB is also working on similar lines and "witnessing, learning, and judging" are important issues there according to Cheryl Bartlett. While Rita McKeough said nothing similar was happening formally at NSCAD, Terry Wagar stated that mentoring at Saint Mary's was particularly strong and that peer mentoring was aimed specifically at encouraging young faculty to stay in Halifax and not to go elsewhere.

The follow up question from the facilitator, "Did you have some form of peer mentoring when you entered the system?" was met with a negative response. Most of the award winners at the table talked of a climate of judging, not fostering, and many said that they had been afraid to approach older teachers for advice in case they were seen as showing and having weaknesses. Only one person, the facilitator, spoke of positive mentoring experiences from senior faculty while he was a Teaching Assistant at the University of Toronto. He told of regular meetings with Dr. Keith Ellis, a senior faculty member of the Spanish Department, who visited his class regularly and commented encouragingly on his teaching. There was a strong feeling that workshops and peer mentoring were beneficial and should be emphasized at all the regional seats of higher education.

## 5. Skills and Skills Transcript Components:

The group agreed that everyone was now actively involved in teaching much more than the subjects with which they were nominally associated. The discussion moved towards a description of the skills that were being presented and elaborated in courses along with the content component. Patricia DeMéo described the Skills Transcript Classes at Dalhousie and stated that students were pleased with learning things of value that did not seem at first to be attached to their normal in course learning process. Dalhousie is one of the first universities to implement a Career Portfolio which organizes those skills into a formal series of documents. At Dalhousie, these Skill Transcript Classes are "normal" classes for which the professor has identified the process skills as well as the content matter under study. According to John Schellenberg, skills were recognized and valued at the Mount and steps were being taken to formalize this skill developing process. More students were encouraged to "make connections" and develop their own usable skills. Cheryl Bartlett stated that in Biology at UCCB, for example, the skills component of the laboratory work was totally transferable and fell outside the box labeled *Course Content*. Rita McKeough took a more pragmatic view of skill development. For her, the skill lay in solving a set problem, for in computer design there were

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many questions and few single, authoritative answers. The skill lay in finding a process that led to an answer that was artistically and personally satisfying. In this sense, the process of the course was as important as the content, for in many ways the process in designing multimedia by computer was also the content. Thus problem-solving led to self-esteem led to increased skills led to jobs and life after design school. However, this learning was, of necessity, a life long process as the problems would always be there and the skill lay always in solving them.

Terry Wagar continued the content vs method debate and talked of creating low risk and high risk environments. The low risk environment encouraged the students to experiment and develop for the fear of failure was distanced, if not removed, when there were no set answers, only a varying set of means leading to similar ends. He elaborated on critical and creative skills and spoke of the need for the accreditation of skills. These, he suggested, should always be written up in the course outline. And the specific skills that would be developed in the course should be set out clearly. This debate continued with a description of open and closed learning situations where there could be a single answer (closed) or multiple answers (open) to any problem. The necessity of the development of recognition procedures for the "open" answer was emphasized at this stage. One of the key components of modern education, it was pointed out, is the open, rather than the closed learning situation. Robert Thompson emphasized this point as he described the importance of "using a skill learned in one situation under a completely different set of circumstances." Successful people, he continued, are often able to do this easily, but sometimes it helps to point this skill out to students. Too often we get comments such as "This isn't a maths course, it's biology, so why are you making us manipulate numbers in this fashion?"

John Schellenberg suggested that critical vs creative thinking was rather a chicken and egg situation, it being very difficult to tell which came first and why. He also suggested that the level at which a student takes a course will also influence the student's skill in that course as students clearly develop across their years of study, even if we, as faculty, sometimes question that development. The conversation then returned to the necessity of creating a safe environment for creativity. Creativity involves risk taking, and students will not take risks, especially with their grades, if they are penalized heavily for moving away from the comfort zone of memorization.

*Energy break:*

At this point there was an energy break. It was encouraging to see that the conversations continued throughout the break and that groups formed, reformed, and argued diligently even when they were meant to be resting. So successful was the energy break, that the atmosphere in the room was very relaxed afterwards and it became difficult to stay on track as ideas were discussed, dismissed, and brought back to the table. In fact, the after break session became more of a brainstorming session and it was much more difficult to follow the ebb and flow of the conversation.

## **6. Lower Standards in Education:**

There was a post break reaction to oversimplification and the "dumbing down" of education. Students had to be well-prepared, said Robert Thompson. They either knew their work or didn't. There was a well documented series of studies on falling standards, especially in incoming students. This was not as noticeable in some universities as it was in others. Cheryl Bartlett pointed a finger at television, computerized games, and the whole solitude of education where students now communicated with a keyboard and a screen rather than with human beings. As a result, she suggested, they could look, but they could not necessarily see. A consequence of this was the waning writing standards about which everyone present complained. In Patricia DeMéo's words, many could "talk the talk but not walk the walk." It was essential to put learning laboratories into place and to bring all students up to certain standards. There was a general lamentation about the dearth of role models in certain fields, especially, for example, science writers who were capable of understanding science AND explaining it to a non-scientific public.

Rita McKeough spoke of the difficult times in high schools, especially in the dwindling fine arts departments. The emotional demands on teachers at all levels are becoming extremely hard. Back up counseling is needed at all levels, for teachers as well as for students. Sylvia Hale emphasized the difficulties faced by working mothers and stressed that many students were working a 30 or 40 hour week in order to fund their studies. As a result, they had little time for study outside the classroom and our traditional ideas of the role of the student were considerably disrupted. Mention was made of early morning classes when students fell asleep, sometimes through lack of food and sometimes through sheer tiredness.

The debate then turned towards testing: type and style of examinations, term papers, journals, multiple choice tests, computer testing, essay questions, oral and written projects, skits and dramatizations, the difficulties of assessing group work, brief written answers, all these items were discussed, some in more detail than others. Individuals also elaborated on the amount of time they were forced to spend on teaching and correcting basic writing skills, even when they were employed to teach other more advanced subjects. The nature of writing assignments was described and discussed and some tips on how to improve writing were shared: smaller assignments, more frequent, seek professional help early, refer students to writing labs, emphasize writing skills, writing without grading, circulation of essays to 3 peers before submitting to prof, etc.

## **7. Incorporating Technology:**

The question was asked: "Are administrations forcing the advance towards integrating technology into all courses?" Responses were very prompt and very varied. Rita McKeough thought not. There is too much money involved with upgrading technology and keeping pace is an expensive habit when computers are advancing with a new generation every three months or so. The other problem with keeping up with the technology is the balancing act that is necessary when keeping up with one's own field at the same time. Many productive academics have switched to computer technology only to find that they have lost the cutting edge in their own specialized fields while learning to do what are really only the basics of computing.

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Rita McKeough described this as “stopping for a second while the world moves inexorably on”!

Cheryl Bartlett emphasized the necessity of maintaining a balance at all times. In her opinion, to rely too heavily on only one mode of learning was a mistake. Robert Thompson felt that technology should be used, but that we shouldn’t allow ourselves to become “victims of technology.” He reminded us that printed books themselves were once considered advanced technology, and now we take them for granted. Terry Wagar warned us against the abuse of technology: “use it, but don’t abuse it” he urged.

Sylvia Hale thought that there was a generalized push towards technology at institutions, and she quoted her own university as an example of an institution that was trying to be cost-effective while getting machines to do the work of human beings. The Psychology Department and the Criminology Department had both recently produced cd roms that were being used both for teaching and as a replacement for professors. She did not think this was a good thing as knowledge becomes rapidly outmoded and learning suffers, she felt, when there was no face to face contact.

#### **8 Faculty Teaching Outside Specialized Areas:**

This led directly into the idea of faculty teaching outside their specialized areas. There seems to be a certain amount of movement here with specialists being asked to teach outside their specialist areas in general courses like Introduction to University Studies, Arts 1000, Humanities 1000, and basic Writing Programs. Terry Wagar remarked that he was heavily involved in team teaching beyond his normal duties. Cheryl Bartlett spoke of the fragmentation of knowledge that sometimes resulted from this. Patricia DeMéo spoke of her own experiences as a teacher both of languages (French) and of communication studies. She claimed that it was a tough, but very enriching experience to break out from one’s own field and to enter another field of teaching. She also spoke approvingly of the very conscious need to bring as much knowledge as possible together while teaching in dual programs.

#### ***Drawing to a close:***

At this stage, time was running out and the award winners agreed to meet again later to discuss the remaining issues around another table. It was agreed that the session was very worthwhile and that the university presidents should be thanked and should be encouraged to keep these meetings going. Participating members agreed to draw relevant issues from the discussion and to present them back at their own universities.

Respectfully submitted,  
Roger Moore, Facilitator

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