

ASSOCIATION OF ATLANTIC UNIVERSITIES

Institutional Award Winners Retreat

Friday, October 25th, 2002

University of Prince Edward Island

Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island

Faculty Development Bulletin

Fall 2002

- Participants:** John Beck (St. Francis Xavier University), Nigel Firth (Nova Scotia Agricultural College), Kate Frego (UNB, Saint John), Kathy Gottschall-Pass (University of Prince Edward Island), Jean Guthrie (Memorial University), Andrea Schutz (St. Thomas University), Judith Scrimger (Mount Saint Vincent University), Gillian Thomas (Saint Mary's University), Deborah Wills (Mount Allison University)
- Invited participant:** Gary Poole, University of British Columbia and President of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education
- Facilitator:** Roger Moore (St. Thomas University)

Topics of Discussion Inside Bulletin:

1. *Welcome and introductions*
2. *Managing an ever increasing workload*
3. *Email and voice mail*
4. *Tenure, promotion, research and accountability*
5. *Building a teaching culture within the department*
6. *Nutritional break*
7. *Legitimizing phrases*
8. *Managing large classes in the new environment*
9. *Improving instructional development*
10. *Grading procedures*
11. *Grand farewell*

1. Welcome and introductions

The retreat began with the facilitator welcoming each participant and asking them individually, as has become the tradition, to describe the process of events that brought them to the Association of Atlantic Universities Institutional Award Winners Retreat. The participants expressed surprise that they had been chosen and pointed to the fact that they were proud to be representing their universities, but that there were many other faculty at each of their institutions who were also deserving. When the strictness of some of the procedures were outlined, it became clear that the award winners had been chosen objectively and that all merited the recognition they had received. The invited participant, Dr. Gary Poole was then introduced and spoke briefly to the participants about his own 3M Teaching Fellowship. He explained how it had changed his career and spoke about the responsibility which he and his 3M group felt towards encouraging excellence in teaching at all levels. He also hoped that this group of participants would dedicate themselves to spreading the gospel of excellence in teaching by bringing the message that "Excellent Teaching Matters" back to their universities.

2. Managing an ever increasing workload

Nigel Firth began by commenting on the "added weight of irrelevant peripheral work" that had been accumulating steadily over the last few years. Deborah Wills suggested that the Atlantic universities really were in a time of change and that stress was caused by rapid changes which included an increased teaching and administrative load. In addition, while Atlantic universities had traditionally concentrated on teaching excellence, there was a new and disturbing pressure to also produce excellent research. This weighed heavily on younger faculty. Especially, Andrea Schutz added, on younger faculty who were also involved in the process of starting families. Kathy Gottschall-Pass suggested that younger faculty seemed no longer to be facing a direct choice: either *research* or *teach*; now they were expected to excel in both areas. "How many jobs do we actually have?" she asked and mentioned researcher, teacher, administrator, counsellor, and homemaker. Deborah Wills said that junior faculty were being lost on account of a seemingly insurmountable workload. "Are there any secret formulae? How can we cope?" she asked.

Gary Poole answered that question: "Cope?" he asked. "You can't!" He said that there was "no secret formula." He then repeated the question: "How many full time jobs do you have?" A quick count around the table showed each participant with 2, 3, or 4 full time jobs. Gary Poole advised that quality of life was extremely important. There must be an acceptance of what you can and can't achieve because nobody can do everything. You must make choices, set out priorities, and above all, refuse to feel guilty about those things which you are unable to do. Nigel Firth stressed the necessity of lists and prioritization and the facilitator showed the group his note book pages for Sunday, 01 September 2002, with prioritized numbers (1-17) on a list of essential tasks to be completed for the next day! Judith Scrimger asked us to feel sympathy for our students, for didn't we overload them in the same way we were being overloaded? This was, she stressed, a societal problem of which we must all be aware. Nigel Firth asked if it had always been like this. The general consensus was that things were getting worse and the "unimportant, bureaucratic workload" was getting heavier. Jean Guthrie suggested that the national government was to blame for the lack of money that was contributing to our general "busyness" and suggested that we all point our finger, not at our university administrations, but rather at successive years of government underfunding.

3. *Email and voice mail*

Deborah Wills spoke about the increasing use of time consuming email and voice mail: in addition, secretarial budgets were being cut, student numbers were increasing, students were connected to the LAN in their residences, and on top of this, there was an expectation that all e-mail questions would be answered immediately. The suggestion was made that we should collectively look at working conditions at an individual and a structural level. Judith Scrimger noted that e-mail has provided some great opportunities for one-on-one teaching and establishing individual relationships with students. Gary Poole said that he was not playing the email game anymore. He was now scanning his email daily and deleting the unimportant items.

4. *Tenure, promotion, research and accountability*

The issues of tenure, promotion, and accountability were raised. There was an obsession with accountability: "From above and below!" suggested Gillian Thomas, and Nigel Firth stated that evaluation and accountability were fine, but did not have to be so extremely time consuming. Jean Guthrie suggested that young faculty coming up for tenure should be given a course off to prepare themselves for the ordeal. She was also worried that young faculty felt abandoned at this time and should not be left alone to get on with things as best they could. The division between teaching and research provoked a storm of conversation! Kate Frego described the system in her university by means of which research award winners receive a \$1500 reward and teaching release for one course, while

teaching award winners receive exactly the same. "Why get release from teaching because you are a good teacher?" she asked. "We get time off for research, because research brings in money!" Nigel Firth commented. "And it's always easier to measure research objectively!"

Andrea Schutz mentioned the amount of time now needed to prepare a grant application. Jean Guthrie suggested that funding was essential, although difficult to come by in her field; moreover, in the face of pressure to bring in funds, she reminded us that "we have to be careful that unfunded research does not lose respect." Nigel Firth spoke of the necessity for independent funding in his fields. Gary Poole stated that in medical research, large sums of money were available at a moment's notice from the large pharmaceutical and other interested groups, but that grant money was often tied to professors not teaching so that they would have time for their research.

Kate Frego said that her new president had stated publically that teaching is now the top priority in her university. Several voices were raised and the different campus cultures in Atlantic Canada were discussed at some length. The delicate balance between teaching and research was again raised. Jean Guthrie said she had been told, long ago, that excellent research and passable teaching are more likely to be considered grounds for promotion to Professor than the other way around. This was contested by John Beck who stated that teaching played an enormously important role at his own university where people had and did get promoted because of their skills as excellent teachers. "While teaching and research are required equally," he said, "it was possible to choose one area in which to excel, while demonstrating competence in the other." He also suggested that university administrations were changing and that where once we were all dealing with faculty who had risen through the ranks, we were now dealing more and more with trained administrators who had never known the pressures and needs of the academy. The administrators are feeling the pressure from outside and they are passing it on. John Beck also pointed out that P & T committees were staffed, not only by our colleagues, but by a range of our peers that covered many aspects of university teaching and research. These committees were usually remarkably objective. Judith Scrimger suggested that the growth rate of prepared material (teaching portfolio, research portfolio), was so enormous that people were no longer willing to serve on such committees.

5. *Building a teaching culture within the department*

Jean Guthrie emphasized the importance of building a teaching culture within the individual departments and the question arose of the role of part time teachers, many of whom were outstanding teachers and put in hours well in excess of the time demanded by their contracts. This led to a debate on ethics in and around teaching and it was suggested that a

whole new rhetoric of teaching should be constructed. In addition, individual and structural ways should be found to navigate mixed demands (teaching/research) and young faculty particularly should not be abandoned. Participants tried to quickly create positive teaching rhetoric and it was suggested that teachers should emphasize that they were *sending out the next generation of scholars* or *fertilizing receptive minds*. Gary Poole then encouraged everyone with an excellence in teaching award to receive it and to celebrate it. "Accountability is one thing," he said, "but values are another. You must all fight for those values you respect and believe in." He described how peer teaching reviews had developed at his university and how teaching and the teaching culture within departments had been improved by such voluntary peer reviews. "You are all people deeply committed to teaching," he said. "As such, you must be advocates and must speak up for your strong sense of responsibility to and for other human beings."

6. *Nutritional break*

We agreed on a ten minute nutritional break, but such was the power of the topics under discussion, that we gathered in groups of two and three and only sat down formally thirty minutes later. Everyone present stated that these informal corridor chat groups are one of the most important things that happen at these gatherings!

7. *Legitimizing phrases*

After the break, we spoke briefly about the type of legitimizing phrases we might use in teaching. Gillian Thomas reminded us that teaching is a process not a product and it is difficult to measure a process. Jean Guthrie said she was tired of all slogans and her own slogan was "No more slogans!" There were more important things to do.

8. *Managing large classes in the new environment*

Jean Guthrie suggested we must protest against rising class sizes. She stated further that optimum class size should be determined by subject and not by a one size fits all clause in a contract. It was difficult, but still possible, to be interactive in large classes, but the term *large class* varied for each subject. She worried that large classes impose a particular epistemology because they make it difficult for students to create knowledge, question, and challenge. The process of trial and experiment was destroyed by teaching a large group, she suggested, for homogeneity of teaching became far more important. Andrea Schutz also emphasized the necessity of determining optimum class size by subject. She had elaborated a journal approach, where students wrote their class problems in a journal. John Beck spoke of the necessity of loading the fundamentals at the entry university level. Jean Guthrie asked where the need for discovery had gone? "Students surely have to find things out for themselves." "Informed discovery," replied John Beck, "means that they must first have some information to work

with." Kate Frego spoke of the high attrition rate of first year students. Personal contacts make all the difference. Key skills must be transferred via required classes and the anxiety level of first year students must somehow be reduced. John Beck suggested learning all the class names before class and congratulated his university on presenting him with a computer photo of each student on his class list. If you want to know your students, ask them "to place a photo in their journals" was one suggestion. Gillian Thomas thought that group pictures would be a good idea. Andrea Schutz introduced the idea of ice breakers and these were discussed rapidly and briefly. John Beck dismissed ice breakers but stated that "in our department we bring the third year chemistry students together in a course where they learn to make presentations before just the third year chemistry students and one faculty member, thus minimizing the intimidation some may feel in front of the whole department. As well, all of our fourth year courses have a class presentation component either in the form of oral presentations or in a poster session. In addition all senior advanced majors and honours students give a presentation at one (or two for the honours) of our weekly department seminar sessions."

9. *Improving instructional development*

The facilitator spoke briefly about the presence on the www of *PosPed* (The *Positive Pedagogy* E-magazine run by STLHE). Jean Guthrie asked how many present had teaching programs for their graduate students and a discussion ensued on the value of early help and advice in teaching careers. The importance of personal contact was again established. Faculty have to be advocates of students and there must be a commitment to the advocate's role. However, when students run into problems, we must remember that we are not trained guidance counsellors. Are there any set rules for dealing with the many emergencies that arise in the course of the term? Responses indicated that student counselling services were necessary and that part of our task was to get students who found themselves in difficulties into counselling as soon as possible.

Many remarked on the excellent relationship between themselves and their counselling services. Kate Frego spoke about students "on the edge" and several voices joined in the general concern about the difficult balancing act that young (often un-) married mothers performed while managing their child(ren) and their studies. Several voices spoke in admiration of the multiple tasks performed, often very successfully, by these students. Several people spoke of the transitional and transformational process that was taking place on their campuses. Gillian Thomas recommended the book *Becoming an Ally* (by Anne Bishop) and Deborah Wills spoke of the necessity of remaining an ally and an advocate and of breaking down the *us versus them* culture.

10. Grading procedures

This topic catapulted us directly into the next one: how do we grade our students when we come too close to them? Can we still be objective? Deborah Wills spoke of the necessity of correcting the writing, not the writer and then told us about the *ombudsperson* elected in her class to represent all students fairly. Several voices spoke on the escalation of student expectations as opposed to the reality of their actual academic situations. Gillian Thomas mentioned the blight of evaluation while Jean Guthrie advised her students to "Revise! Revise! We don't write alone!" Nigel Firth said that grading was a heavy responsibility but one that we had to do. That students identified with their grades was a commonly held opinion. Thus the phrase "But I'm not a C student!" was stressing to both student and teacher. Several people emphasized the necessity of taking subjectivity out of all comments and others suggested interviewing everyone with a C while praising everyone with a B+ and up. Kathy Gottschall-Pass admitted that she hated grading and explained how she used problem based learning to train students for the real world. Her description of a multiple choice medical examination on vitamin supplements was received with delight by the group.

Gillian Thomas recommended self evaluation procedures and Andrea Schutz stressed that evaluation procedures changed for every course and that there were no simple, hand made solutions. Her secret was moving students from small writing assignments through a progression that led eventually to the writing of the essay. John Beck spoke of our honesty as evaluators and of the necessity of evaluating for different things at different levels. Strive always for a quick, accurate and honest return of the marks, he encouraged. Further, he stressed the importance of establishing the grading scheme as early in the course as possible and of sticking by that for each student in the course -- with appropriate modifications for students with sound reasons for having missed marked components.

Judith Scrimger recounted her experiences with writing portfolios in her work as a developer of professional writers. "It is not how you write at the beginning, but at the end of the course." Kate Frego spoke of the necessity of empowering students by giving them a certain amount of freedom. Jean Guthrie then recommended *Voices from the classroom*, *Writing to Learn*, and *Inkshedding*, known more formally as the *Canadian Society for the Study of Language and Learning*, as sources to which people could go for more information on developing writing skills. Deborah Wills expressed her concerns about handing back marks and several alternative methods were suggested. Jean Guthrie said that she encouraged her people to only mark two paragraphs and then to send students with difficulties straight to the writing centre. Nigel Firth asked how people dealt with make-up examinations. Gillian Thomas suggested same structure, but different questions; Judith Scrimger advocated giving the

questions out in advance and allowing the students time to prepare their answers. The facilitator suggested that examinations did not have to be as threatening as we sometimes make them. Add an extra test, so that one test can always be dropped; make the final a challenging examination: if students do better on it than they do during the term, let the final mark stand; grade the questions in such a way that successfully completing Part D (easy questions) gains a D Grade; successfully completing Part C (standard questions) earns a C grade; successfully completing Part B (tough questions) successfully gains a B grade; and finally, successfully completing Part A, questions set at a nationally (or internationally) compatible level, gains the grade of A.

11. Grand farewell

Nobody wanted to leave. The group is planning to get together again next year at the University College of Cape Breton. There we are hoping to run an interactive discussion panel that will operate much the same way that this one did.

Respectfully submitted,

Roger Moore, Facilitator
St. Thomas University

PARTICIPANTS:

John Beck, Department of Chemistry, St. Francis
Xavier University

Nigel Firth, Department of Plant and Animal Sciences,
Nova Scotia Agricultural College

Kate Frego, Department of Biology, UNB, Saint John

Kathy Gottschall-Pass, Department of Family and
Nutritional Sciences, University of Prince Edward
Island

Jean Guthrie, Department of English, Memorial
University

Gary Poole, University of British Columbia and
President of the Society for Teaching and Learning
in
Higher Education

Andrea Schutz, Department of English Language and
Literature, St. Thomas University

Judith Scrimger, Department of Public Relations,
Mount Saint Vincent University

Gillian Thomas, Department of English, Saint Mary's
University

Deborah Wills, Department of English, Mount Allison