

ASSOCIATION OF ATLANTIC UNIVERSITIES

Institutional Award Winners Retreat
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University College of Cape Breton
Sydney, Nova Scotia

Faculty Development Bulletin

Fall 2003

Participants: Irene Bernard (St. Francis Xavier University), Janet Hill (Saint Mary's University), Susan Drain (Mount Saint Vincent University), Robert Lapp (Mount Allison University), Sheila Andrew (St. Thomas University), Lynn Crosby (Nova Scotia Agricultural College), Fiona O'Donoghue (University of Prince Edward Island), James Stolzman (Dalhousie University)

Facilitator: Roger Moore (St. Thomas University)

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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 often 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 in each of their institutions who were also deserving. When the strictness of some of the procedures was outlined, it became clear that the award winners had been chosen objectively and that all merited the recognition they had received. Again this year, it is hoped that this group of participants will dedicate themselves to spreading the gospel of excellence in teaching by bringing the message that "Excellent Teaching Matters" back to their universities.

2. Towards a broader range of teaching awards

Participants agreed in general that there should be more teaching awards, even at smaller universities. Further, it was suggested that awards should be offered in different departments and faculties. James Stolzman pointed out that this was already being done at Dalhousie University where there

are multiple awards for teaching: in different departments, in different areas within a department, and in different faculties. Susan Drain wondered how many universities follow the commendable practice of recognizing instructional leadership, noting that almost all those present at the retreat were winners of teaching awards for individual performance. Where universities give multiple awards, it seems only one individual attends the AAU retreat: she wondered if invitations were rationed to minimize the cost to the supporting institutions or whether other commitments interfered with other winners' ability to attend. The question of financial recognition for Excellence in Teaching Awards was raised and Robert Lapp raised everyone's hopes by announcing in a very shocked and embarrassed fashion that he had actually received \$5,000 this year from Mount Allison University. There was general agreement that although the recognition was nice, if teaching rewards are going to approach research awards, then there must be a standard approach to financing these awards across Atlantic Canada. Fiona O'Donoghue suggested that we consider offering awards for teaching large classes. The idea of teaching awards for part-time faculty was received enthusiastically by everyone present as it was agreed that more respect should be shown towards part-timers, many of whom are dedicated professionals and excellent teachers.

Janet Hill asked how we could recognize what actually went on inside classrooms. There is, she suggested, some very good teaching that goes unnoticed. Also, at times, bad performances can be overlooked. She suggested that an administrative presence in faculty classrooms was akin to Pierre Trudeau's famous remark about having policemen in the nation's bedrooms: they did not belong there! SGIDS (Small Group Instructional Development Sessions), peer observers, video taping of classes, and the presence of invited guests were all discussed, as was the effect that team teaching had on an individual's performance. Irene Bernard pointed out that, especially in Education Departments, team teaching, peer coaching and peer assessment were more common. Other voices suggested that teachers reigned within their own realms and that outsiders upset the balance of the class, rather like the lurking shadows of school inspectors. Robert Lapp said that compulsory peer review had been rejected at Mount Allison. Susan Drain said that peer review was accepted at Mount Saint Vincent, provided that such review was initiated by the teacher. James Stolzman suggested that compulsory, in class reviews would be resisted fiercely at Dalhousie University. Participants agreed that the idea of compulsion would be resented.

Susan Drain commented on what she perceived to be the slim possibilities of achieving promotion under teaching excellence. However, Sheila Andrew believed that it was possible at her university where there have, in fact, been cases of promotion to full professor based on excellence in teaching. The approximation of 40% research, 40% teaching, and 20% service still held good in some places, but emphasis was almost always on research; a good research record would usually outweigh all but the most obvious deficiencies in teaching performance.

As to whether the experience of receiving a teaching award had prompted any new insights about the relative importance of teaching at different levels in the academy, James Stolzman said that news of the institutional award he received did not reach most of his students and a sense of modesty prevented him from informing them. By contrast, when he recently received the AAU Award he was featured on the university homepage and many of his students, past and present, e-mailed congratulatory messages. He raised this point at the retreat not to personalize the issue but in the hope that universities might realize when publicizing teaching awards that the kind of people who receive these awards typically have students, current and former, who would like to know that their professor is being honored. Janet Hill agreed that students didn't always seem to know about these things and Irene Bernard complimented those universities, her own included, which offered small plaques to be hung on office walls where they could be seen. Sheila Andrew spoke of her university's Wall of Teaching Fame on which award winners have their photographs displayed. An award for excellence in teaching raises expectations, however, and it is not always a comfortable burden to bear. It was agreed that more publicity for teaching awards would be nice and

many expressed surprise at the number of people in the local community who knew about such awards when they were well publicized. The impact of teaching awards on promotion and tenure (Fiona O'Donoghue) and the importance of good teaching to new faculty (James Stolzman) and to the university's reputation among the public could not be stressed enough.

3. *Professional development*

Retreat participants turned their attention to the difficulties of balancing an ever more crowded schedule (Fiona O'Donoghue) in which excellence in research, excellence in teaching, and time consuming university service joined hands with an ever growing bureaucratic need for accountability, documentation, and paperwork. Robert Lapp expressed an interest in maintaining himself up to date with teaching methodologies and asked for suggestions as to what avenues might be available. Suggestions included: teaching workshops (Sheila Andrew), high school professional development days (Irene Bernard), websites and links (James Stolzman). The facilitator stressed the excellent work done by STLHE (the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education with its online magazine *Positive Pedagogy*), and by the Atlantic Association of Universities with their continued promotion of good teaching by means of the annual Institutional Award Winners' Retreat and the annual Teaching Showcase with its accompanying proceedings.

These answers provoked more questions for help. How do I teach writing skills in classes which contain 70, 70, and 57 students, asked Sheila Andrew, who added that setting and marking regular and responsible writing assignments for 197 students is incredibly time consuming. Deteriorating writing standards and flourishing multiple choice tests seemed to be a problem that concerned everyone. The overcrowding of classrooms made teaching an even more difficult profession (James Stolzman) and it was necessary to add more teachers (Susan Drain) and to design collaborative work spaces (Janet Hill) where students might work on group projects. James Stolzman said there had been experiments at various universities with courses being taught in university residences, particularly at night. This also led to the development of learning communities (Susan Drain and Irene Bernard) and was a positive step towards enhancing learning.

The general tiredness of students was remarked upon and one suggestion (Robert Lapp) was that small sleeping spaces, Japanese style, be made available, particularly for students who were at campus all day with no chance of returning home. The placing of chairs and tables in small, quiet corners (Janet Hill) had proved successful. Also the careful location of settees and armchairs where groups could meet and talk (Irene Bernard) was recommended. The necessity, in the new university, for micro-waves and small, relatively private eating spaces was also remarked upon by several voices.

The mention of overcrowded classrooms led directly to a discussion on the use of space (Robert Lapp). Universities had been built originally for smaller numbers of people (Irene Bernard) and were also constructed in different times for different purposes and for different student-teacher ratios (Janet Hill). Several voices commented on the ineffective use of space in our universities and Sheila Andrew suggested we strive for more student work space. Janet Hill underlined that space really does determine the way in which we teach and she mentioned the necessity of making one on one contact with students. Fiona O'Donoghue stressed the importance of movement, especially within long classes, language classes, inter-active classes, and classes where dialogue and group work is an essential part of teaching. Several voices acquiesced to the absurdity of placing large numbers in inter-active classes and then scheduling them in lecture theatres where seats were rigidly placed in rows and dialogue and movement were scarcely possible. Spare a thought, said Irene Bernard, to students who come from high school classes of 25-35 students and suddenly find themselves lost in university classes of 60, 70, 100 people and sometimes more.

James Stolzman suggested that first-year students might benefit from a greater number and variety of small classes whereas large lecture classes might be more defensible, pedagogically, with upper-level students who presumably have already acquired and demonstrated writing and other skills often absent in large class instruction. The discussion now centered on first year seminars and their relevant value to students. Susan Drain suggested that values would vary according to the disciplines being taught and she stressed that introductory classes in grammar intensive and writing intensive groups were essential. Lynn Crosby actually teaches 150 or so in 2 first year lecture sections, usually 60 in one and 90-100 in the other, and not in one big class. She called it a big class for any discussion or even questions from most of the students. She referred to it as the "cast of 1000" with its 150-200 new faces in one term. The biggest problem she said, is getting to know them all. Could large classes be broken down into smaller discussion groups asked Irene Bernard. Susan Drain suggested that seminars would vary in emphasis according to the disciplines being taught and she stressed that introductory classes in which writing could be intentionally addressed were essential. Janet Hill suggested that while classes were driven by a M-W-F timetable based on 3 credit hour courses meeting 3 times a week, it would be difficult to change the nature of teaching.

4. Nutrition break

The nature and rhythm of the meeting was changed by the arrival of fresh fruit and juices. A refreshed and lively group sat down again to continue the conversation.

5. Student evaluation of teachers

The unsatisfactory nature of student evaluations was raised immediately after the break. Robert Lapp asked if anybody

knew of a good evaluation system but there were negative responses around the table. Susan Drain reported that her institution had recently replaced its old instrument with one as yet untested, which did away with rankings on such measures as "professor's ability to arouse my interest" or "professor's work is up to date." How can students know whether a professor's work is up to date she asked. By the dates on their bibliographies, came the reply. Yet, in many cases, especially at the first and second year level, bibliographies are rarely circulated to students. Evaluation of teaching was seen to be a real problem area (Robert Lapp) and faculty responses to information received, both formative and summative, from student evaluations were discussed.

The importance of faculty and staff supervision during student evaluations was emphasized (Irene Bernard) in order to prevent orchestrated evaluations when students assess faculty. James Stolzman suggested that it might be interesting if students were allowed to assess professors with letter grades from A to F, just as we evaluate them. This might also teach a better regard for grades! There was no back ground knowledge for the scales being used (Irene Bernard) and this was particularly difficult in first year classes. That administrations would impose the days on which evaluations would be distributed was also questioned. A deadline or a period of time should be made available for evaluations, but not a specific time and a specific day as this often disrupted teaching schedules with very short notice and at an important stage of the term.

6. The future of the university

The question of student expectations was raised and traditional faculty lectures were defended on the grounds that lectures were what students expected when they came to university. Group work was attacked (stronger students seemed to loathe it) and defended (weaker students looked forward to the opportunities it gave them), but poorly organized group work was strongly criticized. There should always be a double mark (Irene Bernard) which combined an individual mark, for individual responsibilities, with a group mark, for shared work. Group work and individual evaluations, even if they were lower than expected, were all part of the "real world," said Susan Drain. Sheila Andrew suggested ways in which peer evaluations can be used in group work but very specific criteria are necessary for them to be effective (Irene Bernard). Irene Bernard also spoke of the speeding up of our culture and of the different learning styles which were now present in our classrooms. There is great pressure for mixed media representations (Fiona O'Donoghue) with music and slides modeled on TV shows and video channels, but not everybody has the time or the team (Robert Lapp) to indulge in such creations. Such multi-media presentations catered to a new generation with shorter attention spans (Janet Hill) and it was now necessary to interact in many different ways so that knowledge might be internalized by multiple styles of intelligence (Irene Bernard and Fiona O'Donoghue).

Burnout was always present in the professor's life and faculty had to protect themselves and take greater care of themselves now than ever before. Computers might seem to lessen work, but they had to be programmed and kept up to date and this actually was even more time consuming. In addition, Lynn Crosby argued for handouts over posted notes since there was a physical engagement with paper that was absent from engagement with the computer screen. James Stolzman suggested that instructional technology was changing the whole culture of undergraduate education. In particular, WebCt and its analogs have undermined the traditional expectation that attending class was a student's responsibility and essential if he/she wanted to keep informed about what was happening in a class. Increasingly, he found that students see attendance as optional and they feel it is the instructor's responsibility to keep them posted about class "news." In this way, technology changes not only context but also content as well as demanding a regular updating, usually on a daily basis. Email, with its constant demands for an immediate response, was seen by many as a plague and technology was also seen to overload the information system by making ever more information available almost instantaneously (Janet Hill). This made the burn out problem more acute (Susan Drain) especially as the image of student as consumer was being developed, often by administrations who were not in the front lines of teaching. What the student / consumer wants is not always best for them.

The profile of teachers is changing (Janet Hill) and up to date (i.e. technologically competent) faculty are sometimes compared, perhaps too favourably, with traditional (i.e. less technologically committed) teachers. The difficulties faced by new faculty (Sheila Andrew) — teaching, large classes, marking, research, grant applications, committee work, university service, accountability — are growing exponentially, especially for new female faculty members who may also be raising young families.

The conversation now returned to the problems of a deterioration in written skills and Robert Lapp stressed the need for one on one contact in this area. Perhaps fourth year students could be paired with first year students, he asked, recognizing the problem of lack of faculty and lack of funds. There was a clear and urgent need for writing workshops and writing laboratories (Susan Drain); people complained, but very little effort was spent on the problem which must be tackled at all levels, starting before high school. However, it is not the task of the high school teacher to prepare only the best students for university (Irene Bernard), as teachers must respond to all needs of all students. The need for smaller classes and a faculty less burdened by bureaucracy and hence with more time to commit to writing across the curriculum is paramount (Janet Hill). Students must see that writing matters (Susan Drain) and this response can be generated in essays (James Stolzman) which can be read and examined by groups of peers (Irene Bernard). More, it is necessary to give undergraduates opportunities to rewrite essays as experts tell us that this is

precisely the most effective way of teaching people how to write better. The importance of providing models for writing was underlined as was the necessity of providing opportunities for students to speak to essay outlines by presenting them orally (Robert Lapp). In conclusion, the computer presentation with its five bullets and its one line descriptions was deplored as detrimental to the development of the mind, especially when note taking was no longer important since hand-outs were available on line or distributed during or following each class.

7. A sad farewell

Time flies when the discussion is animated and our brief time together was complete. We adjourned and prepared for the journey from the campus of the University College of Cape Breton, so beautiful in the foliage of fall, to the centre of Sydney, down by the water, where our discussions would resume over supper.

Respectfully submitted,

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