

ASSOCIATION OF ATLANTIC UNIVERSITIES

Institutional Award Winners Retreat

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Participants:: Dr. Omar Basabe (St. Thomas University), Dr. Ann Bigelow (St. Francis Xavier University), Prof. Danielle Charron (University of New Brunswick), Prof. Pauline Downer (Memorial University), Dr. Richard Cunningham (Acadia University), Dr. Nauman Farooqi (Mount Allison University), Dr. Marty Leonard (Dalhousie University), Dr. Leonard Lye (Memorial University), Dr. Porter Scobey (Saint Mary's University), Dr. Della Stanley (Mount Saint Vincent University), Dr. Glenn Stratton (Nova Scotia Agricultural College)

Facilitator: Roger Moore (St. Thomas University)

The retreat began, as is traditional, with the introduction of the Institutional Award Winners. Each participant spoke briefly about themselves and the selection process by means of which they had been selected for their awards. While individuals were happy and proud to represent their universities, the rigor and objectivity of the selection process was noted. Award winners are lucky in many ways and they represent a large pool of talented teachers in each university; that said, each award winner richly deserves his or her award and the high teaching quality of each of the winners was duly applauded.

Danielle Charron spoke about being the first full-time, term-appointed instructor at UNB to win the university teaching award. This was a break through for universities in the region and a majority of those present agreed that part time and non-tenure stream faculty should receive equal recognition for excellence in teaching. Whether there should be separate awards or not was open to debate. Richard Cunningham noted that Acadia had, in recent years, not offered an Excellence in Teaching Award. However, the presence of a new teaching-supportive Administration boded well for the future of teaching and teaching awards at Acadia.

The nature of the composition of the selection committees was brought up and Della Stanley described the 12 person committee at MSVU: 4 alumni, 4 students, and 4 faculty members, one of whom was the previous year's winner. Many universities had similar structures and the presence of alumni and students was ubiquitous. The topic of financial reward was discussed briefly and

the \$5,000 prize, together with a trip to a conference of the award winner's choice (Leonard Lye and Pauline Downer, MUN) was looked upon very favourably by the group. Certainly this outweighed the zero financing offered at two regional universities. Porter Scobey asked if some universities only paid lip service to excellence in teaching. The standard university emphasis on research over teaching was brought forward but the facilitator noted that at UPEI this year three professors, all 3M Teaching Fellows, were testing a new contract that permitted promotion to full professor on the grounds of outstanding teaching. Similar clauses exist in other contracts and it will be interesting to see if promotions move forward on the grounds of teaching excellence alone.

The conversation now moved towards a reflection on the links between teaching and research. Those teaching graduate students and / or advanced professional programs (Nauman Farooqi, Pauline Downer, Glenn Stratton, and Leonard Lye ["I teach what I write!"]) spoke of the intimate relationship between research and teaching at the graduate level. However, those who were limited to teaching at the undergraduate level spoke of the difficulties of merging research and teaching. The lack of TAs and Graduate Students meant that researchers were isolated. Further, the necessity of teaching outside the specialized field in an undergraduate situation meant that while staple authors and texts were taught the sharp insights of the researcher into his or her field were rarely revealed to, or challenged by, undergraduate students (Richard Cunningham).

The question of the intrusion of electronics into the classroom was raised. Should the development of new online teaching techniques be considered research? There was a clear split in the group at this point. Porter Scobey described how he had compiled and written the computer laboratory manuals used at his university. Nauman Farooqi outlined the excellent technical facilities and staff offered to him at the Université de Moncton, where he had been teaching a video class with extension to three campuses. Why learn the technology when expert technicians can, and should, be provided by the university IT departments? Others noted that the IT equipment present in the classroom was not always the best. The question of IT theft was raised and everybody told how valuable items had been removed. The availability of suitable teaching space was also an issue. Sometimes there were just not enough smart classrooms to go round. The necessity of having to book specific rooms for specific classes was noted as was the ageing of our facilities. This meant that the original spaces were not designed for the uses to which they were now being put. The joint necessity of abundant and flexible space was emphasized. However, the difficulties of making this available to all but the select few were bemoaned, but also appreciated.

As an introduction to experiential teaching, Della Stanley described her project entitled Pier 21. Pier 21 is expanding its mission to include the story of immigration to Canada from white contact to the present. Part of that expansion includes broadening the Oral History Research component. Senior level Canadian Studies students have been involved in interviewing those who actually passed through Pier 21 and those who have immigrated to Canada in the last 20 years. As part of their course work, students interview groups of immigrants who arrived at Pier 21 during various time periods and these taped interviews form part of an ever growing collection of resources. She also described a teaching tool assignment that involved students researching and preparing the contents for three World War II trunks (soldier, nursing sister, and merchant mariner). These trunks are used at Pier 21 for school workshop presentations. Since 80% of her students head into teaching careers, Della Stanley believes that this assignment gives students practical experience in a number of areas as well as a sense of ownership and community involvement. The Pier 21 project is putting together an enormous data base of ships, arrivals, turn over times, departures, returns, crew numbers, passenger lists, ports of departure, belongings etc which is being accessed by increasing numbers of

people. However, the question arose: is the creation of a data base acceptable as a method of research? Most said yes but some said no. Richard Cunningham emphasized that in English people too often differentiate between the gathering of material (dictionaries, bibliographies, text editions) and research of a critical nature that analyses the gathered material, and he bemoaned this failure to appreciate the value and the absolute need for primary research.

Ann Bigelow then described the service learning courses at St. F. X. They were very popular with the students and allowed students to apply their academic knowledge in real life settings, as well as to apply their learning from these settings to their classroom knowledge. Moreover, these creative and innovative projects provided students with a footing in the realities of daily working life. Leonard Lye described his project at MUN: building a mosque for the local Muslim student population. Separate teams of students were working on the design, financing, building, decoration and management of this building project. Pauline Downer described one of her projects: teams of students that worked with local businesses and assisted them with accounts, financial statements, and business management, all within the MUN Cooperative Learning program. At MtA, Nauman Farooqi had started entrepreneurial courses in which students designed and ran a business for one semester. Grants were available in the forms of loans and so far they had all been paid back on time and with interest. His current project is for his students to design, staff, manage, and run a library coffee shop!

Danielle Charron explained how, at UNB, she integrated her students into the local community in Fredericton. Initially they visited the Centre communautaire Sainte-Anne, but bit by bit they integrated themselves into the Fredericton Francophone community, attending theatre and film sessions, going to readings and art exhibits, working with children in the kindergarten and early school grades program, and visiting the Lieutenant-Governor, the Honourable Dr. Herménégilde Chiasson, by special invitation, at his residence. Omar Basabe then told how he had built a space at St. Thomas University in which Spanish was spoken and the various Hispanic cultures were disseminated. He described the resource centre he had established and spoke of the oral intense course he had designed. This course depends upon the interaction of learners and native speakers in small group situations (3 hours a week with the professor and 3 hours a week with the monitors in a 5-1 ration of student to

native speaker). The creation of this cultural space has been supported strongly by the Spanish Section and the Romance Languages Department. Assessment of students is now both internal (the usual grading system) and external, the international, objective standards of the Spanish Government's Diploma de Español Lengua Extranjera (DELE).

At this point, there was a refreshment break. Conversation continued in small groups, and gradually the retreat participants reassembled. Initial comments were on the high satisfaction of students and faculty with these experiential courses. However, this was followed immediately by cries of sorrow: the amount of time involved! Both students and faculty felt ownership of these courses but an enormous time and energy commitment was needed. Students wanted to be involved, however, and this made the courses a challenge beyond the normal boundaries of teaching. The need for administrators and faculties to acknowledge and support faculty as they develop and conduct experiential courses was expressed.

The question of assessment arose immediately and several views were offered on how to make assessment both meaningful and manageable. It was noted that the majority of the experiential courses involved very low student numbers and Marty Leonard posed the question: how do we deal with meaningful assessment in large classes? The group began by stating that the concept of "large" was very complicated and varied according to both level and disciplines involved. Richard Cunningham stated that courses in English at Acadia were capped, by the English Department, at 30-40 students. Porter Scobey said that under 30 in computing science was usual now, but that he had taught courses of 160-200 in math. Although sitting space in computer labs limited courses realistically to 23 per lab, this figure was still too high, he said, as 15 is a good number for laboratory teaching, if the one on one, hands on relationship is to be kept. Marty Leonard stated that her smallest class was 120. These classes included tutorials and, with the help of several TAs, she organized these tutorials, participating in some; however, although she enjoyed this task, it greatly increased her work load. She had also taught lecture classes with 1000 students and 900 was not uncommon. However, after a specific figure, the size of the audience is immaterial and there is little difference between lecturing to 800 rather than 900 students. Glenn Stratton teaches 150 at the beginner level, but the classes at the upper level and graduate level are very much smaller in

micro-biology, sometimes not more than 20-30 people. He praised the expert help he received from his lab technician team, many of whom had been with him for some time. Outstanding technical help made life in the laboratory so much easier. Leonard Lye agreed with this and noted the potential dangers that were omnipresent in the laboratories – acids, fire, chemicals, electricity; it is essential to maintain a high level of technical help in order to promote safety and decrease these dangers.

Danielle Charron has taught up to 95 students in a basic French course for students who have not finished high school French. She has experimented with learning teams composed of 5 students who have regular contact with native speakers and this approach helps alleviate the negative impact of a larger class with 25 to 35 students. Ann Bigelow said St. F. X. has classes of about 70 students in first year psychology. However, St. F. X. expects 75% of each student's grade to come from written work and this makes incredible demands on the stamina of the teacher as marker, especially if assistance is not available. There were groans of sympathy round the table and various participants spoke of the horrors of marathon marking sessions. Leonard Lye described the 3 term year at MUN where every faculty has a different course loading. In engineering, it is 4 courses per year (2 terms on and one term off, with a normal teaching load of 2 courses per term). In business it could be 3+3 or 3+2, and in some science departments it is 2+1; it is, he said, a very complicated formula which depends on how much research is being accomplished. While graduate courses rarely exceeded 30 students, his first year design course last year contained 169 students; this number has grown to 280 for next year. In addition to teaching, faculty members at MUN are also in charge of labs; however, TA numbers are being reduced for next year.

Pauline Downer teaches 70 students, maximum, at MUN, because that is the size of the largest classrooms! However, when she teaches at St. Mary's the numbers in the Executive Business Program are smaller, and she taught 22 students last year. To the question "Who controls student numbers?" answers were diverse. In some cases it was departments, in others, the administration, and in others, only the computer seemed to know what was happening, and it wasn't always programmed correctly! Nauman Farooqi talked of 90 students at the first year level, but of 20 – 30 students at 3rd and 4th year while Omar Basabe described a cap of 27 students at first year level and relatively small classes, numerically, after that. However, while 24 may appear to

be a small number (compared to 500 or 900), it is still difficult and time consuming to teach a language with communicative methods in an immersion situation when there are 25 students (or more) in the room.

The talking became very rapid and suggestions flew fast and furious. As an alternative to long hours with the pen, Richard Cunningham spoke of a macro for Microsoft Word that would allow professors who received electronic submissions to prepare a list of common errors, double click on the list, and link the professor's pre-recorded explanation either in writing or in speech to the erring student. Some people asked for more TAs; however, Danielle Charron pointed out the time-consuming necessity of training TAs to a suitable standard: for not every bilingual TA has sufficient language skills for marking and error correction. The soft marking options – multiple choice, shorter tests, etc – were eliminated by this group of dedicated teachers, everybody, almost without exception, respecting the necessity of a heavy marking load.

Online evaluations were brought up and Nauman Farooqi was very committed to them. He has a website dedicated to online assessment and he receives 60-70% participation in his online assessments. According to Danielle Charron, UNB are starting online assessments this year and the facilitator stated that he had volunteered to participate in a pilot project for online assessment at STU. The question of anonymity was raised and it was pointed out that university professors are one of the few professional groups who (a) tolerate anonymous assessments and then (b) use them for promotion and tenure purposes. Some dissatisfaction was expressed with student anonymity: after all, professors are not anonymous when they teach and grade.

The question of part-time faculty was broached and difficulties arose immediately. There seemed to be some variation in people's opinions about the quality of part-time teachers: some were excellent, some were poor. Some were totally committed, some were not. Some had outstanding research and teaching experience; some could scarcely qualify for the positions they held. The group tried to distinguish between the pedagogical issues of employing part-time faculty and the political issues; but results across the board were too varied and the retreat was running out of time. We all agreed we had enjoyed ourselves immensely, that it was exceedingly important to recognize and celebrate these teaching awards, and that the financial support we had received to attend this event

should be acknowledged and praised. The sad farewell took place and everybody promised to enjoy their evening.

Respectfully submitted,

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