

ASSOCIATION OF ATLANTIC UNIVERSITIES

Institutional Award Winners Retreat
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Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland

Faculty Development Bulletin

Fall 2006

Participants: Dr. Sandra Bell (University of New Brunswick, Saint John), Professor Judith Scrimger (Mount Saint Vincent University), Dr. Martin van Bommel (St. Francis Xavier University), Dr. Pam Seville (Cape Breton University), Dr. Jane Magrath (University of Prince Edward Island), Dr. Erin Steuter (Mount Allison University), Dr. Kim Fenwick (St. Thomas University), Professor Geoff Raynor-Canham (Memorial University/Sir Wilfred Grenfell College), Dr. Edna Keeble (Saint Mary's University), TA Loeffler (Memorial University)

Facilitators: Dr. Susan Drain (Mount Saint Vincent University)
Dr. Robert Lapp (Mount Allison University)

Suggesting an Agenda

Since last year, the Award Winners Retreat has been co-facilitated by mentor and "mentee," and this year, 3-M Award winner Susan Drain of MSVU was the primary facilitator, mentoring Robert Lapp of Mount Allison, who will carry on next year to mentor Stephen Coughlin of Dalhousie Law. True to the best principles of "experiential learning," Susan handed the reins of the retreat directly to her mentee, after offering excellent suggestions for the range of possibilities this role might offer, and by remaining at all times available for consultation, moral support, and timely advice. Robert recalled Roger Moore's approach of sending an advance email to retreat participants with an agenda of broad areas of possible discussion, so that we might all have a chance to think ahead. These topics included the challenges associated with teaching first-year students, with mentoring T.As, and with encouraging students to reflect on, and remain conscious

of, their own learning processes and goals. Even before the retreat began, the first topic emerged as the group's favourite, with Jane McGrath of UPEI eagerly submitting not one, but two emails, the first recommending Rebekah Nathan's *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student*, and the second raising the important question of how "to foster learning over grades in the classroom,"—how to encourage students to take risks and make mistakes outside the inhibiting fixation on grade point averages.

Telling (New) Stories of Teaching Awards

Once assembled in the comfortable "open square" of the library seminar room at MUN's Faculty of Education, we began by taking up the Showcase theme of story telling—in this case, the stories of how each of us came to be rewarded by our institutions for our teaching. In some cases, these were "new stories" of the growing trend toward increased and significant recognition of teaching excellence, in rare

cases on the same scale as the rewards offered for superior research. These stories, however, were interspersed with some familiar “old stories” of haphazardness and poor communication of process, of contentions among about the significance and import of such awards, of lip service on the part of administrations, and of tokenism in terms of what accompanies the teaching awards and how they are made to count.

Taken as a whole, our stories revealed a surprising range in the *kinds* of institutional teaching awards that exist, from those that are primarily student-driven, through Alumni awards that involve Board-member visits to the classroom and interviews with students, to peer-sponsored awards, including those that are supported by a strong Instructional Development infrastructure, and those that either include an Instructional Leadership component or that recognize “IL” with a completely separate award. Material benefits range from a “classy bouquet” (!), to a plaque, to significant monetary benefits and funds to develop teaching initiatives and to attend teaching conferences. Most hopefully, there were new stories of the ways in which excellence in teaching was made to count publicly. Recognition at Convocation in one example, along with permanent publicity in the Academic Calendar and in prominently displayed “Walls of Fame,” as well as well-advertised public presentations to students and peers.

The next step in this process, it was unanimously agreed, was to ensure that excellence in teaching be enshrined in contracts and Collective Agreements, with clear definitions of the role of teaching awards in tenure and promotion, and of the close interdependence of teaching and research. One example of an advance in

such contracts would be to make promotion automatic for recipients of the 3M Award. Concerns were raised over the stress on quantification in both the assessment of teaching and in what is considered acceptable for presentation under the rubric of Instructional Leadership. Given that the classroom experience and the true “outcomes” of good teaching largely elude quantification, it was felt that the value of “story-telling” should not be lost as a means of capturing the essence of the teaching enterprise. A fine example is the recent book *Making a Difference / Toute la Différence* published by the 3M Council of Teachers, in which story-telling is the primary mode.

Imagining an Ideal Day of First-Year Teaching

In keeping with this model, retreat participants were then asked to pause for a moment, to reflect on the first agenda topic of teaching first-year undergraduates, and to write notes towards the story of an ideal day in the first-year classroom. The tales and visions that emerged from this exercise proved so rich, that the remainder of our time together consisted of an animated exchange on the challenges and rewards in this one area of the profession. We were struck, first of all, by Pam Seville’s liberated approach to her last year of teaching, admiring her willingness to take such risks as launching a Problem-Centered Studies class with out-door trust exercises in the woods surrounding the beautiful CBU campus. These, she explained, helped vividly and memorably to establish the necessary group dynamics for shared or cooperative learning. Edna Keeble then spoke passionately about creating “light-bulb” moments in her large Political Science class at SMU, describing one recent case in which

the active-learning technique of class debate made possible the students' realization that diametrically-opposed ideological positions could share common perspectives on social issues (in this case how neo-conservatives and radical feminists could share ground in their attitudes to prostitution). This was a moment, she said, in which minds were prised open and "students' eyes were slightly larger and brighter." Similarly, Kim Fenwick reminded us of the value of devising questions or examples that lead students in unexpected directions, where the "light-bulb" moment is a kind of experiential learning—for example, in teaching the "availability heuristic" to a recent first-year Psychology class, her line of questioning lead to an actual experience of the cognitive bias named in the heuristic.

And when it comes to experiential learning, both Martin van Bommel and Geoff Raynor-Canham entertained us with the use of powerfully symbolic hands-on demonstrations in the maths and sciences. For example, does spelling matter in Chemistry? Try mixing up sodium nitrite and sodium nitrate — a demonstration Martin's first-year students won't soon forget! Does the difference between Centigrade and Fahrenheit matter in Computer Science? Absolutely, Martin showed us, in that it offers the opportunity to make a potentially dry subject—such as "rounding" in programming functions—"local" and personal (the difference, in other words, between American texts and Canadian examples and exercises). Erin Steuter celebrated the "joyful noise of learning"—the creative hubbub induced by well-planned class activities in her large introductory Sociology classes. Who could imagine that having students build paper airplanes could illustrate the systemic disadvantages created by class inequalities?

Well, she explained, simply have three groups be given different qualities and quantities of materials to build an simple but operational paper airplane and offer different levels of detail in the instructions they have to work with, and watch as a metaphor for stark social inequalities is acted out in a mere fifty minutes.

The "disadvantaged" groups in Erin's example (some of whom produced inferior planes, some of whom gave up, and some of whom revolted against the rules of the activity) lead naturally to a discussion of how to approach the actually disadvantaged undergraduates who populate the back ends of our classrooms, or who never show up at all. The temptation, it was agreed, is to let them fend for themselves when our time as instructors becomes overwhelmed with just keeping a large course functioning, and when our best efforts seem so much better appreciated by the eager over-achievers in the front row. But, as Geoff reminded us (quoting the title of a book by Sheila Tobias), *They're Not Dumb; They're Just Different*. And, as Jane pointed out with reference to Nathan's book *My Freshman Year*, many (perhaps most) students have an entirely different vision of what university learning consists of than we have: where we may see learning as transformational, they may regard it only a means to an end using the currency of grades, and adopt a ruthlessly pragmatic approach to obtaining that currency. Jane's particular concern was with the challenge of teaching composition, and Robert Lapp agreed that a large discrepancy exists between the fast pace of change enjoined by the corporate model of global capitalism and the necessarily slow and recursive pace required to learn the art of writing, or of critical thinking, or even of information literacy.

Various solutions to this challenge were offered by the stories told. We must begin, Judith Scrimger reminded us, by having the students talk to each other, rather than to or through us. Make transparent what we're trying to do; demystify the magic; declare forthrightly to students in (say) a required course in Public Relations: "Here we are—now, how are we going to make this work? What do we need to do *together* to get something out of this experience?" Susan Drain described the moment when students are established enough in the milieu of university to begin to explore it, when they can be offered writing exercises that draw them toward an awareness of their own preconceptions, where they can "quicken"—can start to move and kick and stir. When this happens, we as instructors can then keep a sharp eye for the "happy accidents" that emerge, the unpredictable refractions that provide the truest teaching moments. Robert Lapp talked similarly about the "magic" that can happen when active learning exceeds the limit of our control, when the potential chaos of class discussion forces an alertness for the very detail that will take the whole class—teacher and student—to a new place of understanding. TA Loeffler agreed: it's a question of inviting our students—all of our students—to learn, and extending that invitation over and over, and in different ways. We should take risks ourselves in order to make the invitation to learn an invitation to take the same risks that we are. We are all climbing the mountain of learning together, she said, and as leaders of the expedition, we must remain on "the sharp end of the rope," that is, at the highest point on the rock-face, linked to our followers by life-saving rope, but also at a much greater risk of injury should we fall. Thus, to issue the invitation to learn is to say "We're vulnerable too!"

These were the inspirational stories of teaching that Institutional Award Winners told this year. We all look forward to the new stories that will emerge at next year's retreat.

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