

ASSOCIATION OF ATLANTIC UNIVERSITIES

Institutional Award Winners' Retreat

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Mount Allison University

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Faculty Development Bulletin

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Facilitators: Dr. Ann Bigelow, Department of Psychology, St. Francis Xavier University
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Seven faculty, all teaching award winners from their institutions, met for a lively and provocative discussion on teaching—its joys and challenges. The group members came from diverse disciplines: English, Classics, History, Biology, Mi'kmaq Studies, Geography, and Psychology. They had their discrete concerns about, and styles of, teaching, yet they were united in their dedication to their chosen profession.

Prior to the retreat, the participants were canvassed for the topics they wanted discussed at the retreat. The suggested topics were wide ranging, but were focused in two areas: student centered issues and professional development issues.

Student Centered Issues

Are students different today, and if so, how does this reality affect our teaching?

Students are technologically savvy. They are more globally connected than ever before. Information is not rare or difficult to find. These advances have tremendous potential to be harnessed to enrich our teaching and students' education. Yet there are also

drawbacks to this new reality that need to be recognized.

Our students are used to instant feedback. However, their use of technology is often not in depth. They can find it difficult to discriminate useful information from information that is not. We must be aware of the different levels of technological skills within our classes and not assume all students have knowledge of how to navigate with technology.

Technology can be used to teach students how to evaluate and apply information. We can develop assignments that require critiques of what is found on the web, so that students must apply critical thinking skills to what they find posted. Our assignments can be problem based, where the questions we ask may have several answers and no single right answer. Thus in searching for answers, students develop perspective and evaluation skills.

Technology can contribute to students' feelings of isolation because they rely less on face-to-face encounters. Consequently, it is even more important than before that we get

students to talk and participate, and ideally to relate to one another. Group work can be encouraged and designed so that all members of the group have individual tasks to perform. Students can be asked to evaluate the work of their peers; whether such evaluations are factored into students' marks would be up to the faculty member. It is vital that we foster an environment of inclusion and respect in our classes—respect between faculty and student and also between student and student.

Student anxiety seems to be growing as pressures on students mount. What can we as faculty do to reduce student anxiety?

In our courses, we can be transparent, clarify our pedagogy, and be explicit about grading criteria. We can have an open door policy. We can take students out of the classroom on field trips. We can listen and remain open to what students are saying. As class sizes increase, we can develop ways to make students feel known and valued as people.

We also need to be catalysts for growth. We can challenge students to view the world from new perspectives and move out of their comfort zone. This actually has the potential to reduce student anxiety, especially if we provide support along the way and encourage students to value their own abilities.

Service learning is a powerful means for teaching students to recognize how the subject matter they are studying affects real world problems, to face their often unacknowledged presumptions, and to allow themselves to be empowered by their learning process. Service learning can be applied in any discipline to the benefit of community as well as the students' coursework. Good service learning needs support staff to help locate appropriate service projects within the community and to assure that students, faculty, and community agencies get the benefit from the assignments. Universities should be encouraged to establish and promote service learning.

Professional development issues

How can good teaching be fostered?

Teaching can always be improved. Things that contribute to keeping teaching skills growing include teaching new courses, changing content of existing courses, and trying new teaching techniques. Ultimately, however, we learn from each other. Sharing courses with other faculty stretches our skills. Observing others teach generates new ideas for how to teach. Sharing our teaching knowledge with others benefits all. Universities should be encouraged to promote teaching mentorship programs for faculty.

How can good teaching be more equitably rewarded?

Unlike research, teaching does not have obvious benchmarks for evaluation, which makes the assessment of teaching skill more difficult. Good teaching should count toward promotion and tenure. For rank and tenure decisions, it is primarily the teaching dossier that is used. Yet this practice can be problematic for colleagues who are from cultures where humility is a valued norm, such as Mi'kmaq colleagues. It is often difficult for such colleagues to generate a full record of their accomplishments. This difficulty is not just culturally specific, but also may apply to female colleagues and may be even more widely spread. Universities should be encouraged to allow candidates applying for tenure or promotion to have the option of designating advocates who would develop the candidate's dossier.

Teaching style must be authentic to the personality and temperament of the teacher, thus there are many ways to teach well. The retreat offered a kaleidoscope of ideas and opinions from some of the best university teachers in the Atlantic Provinces. The scheduled three hour retreat continued for almost another full hour because members were reluctant to bring it to an end. It was an invigorating time, and one that affirmed the importance and challenges of teaching well.