

## ASSOCIATION OF ATLANTIC UNIVERSITIES

Institutional Award Winner's Retreat  
Friday, October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Agricultural Campus, Dalhousie University  
Truro, Nova Scotia

Faculty Development Bulletin

Fall 2018

**Participants:** *Dr. Kelly Resmer, Mount Saint Vincent University, Chemistry; Prof. Geneviève Bouchard, Université de Moncton, Psychology; Dr. Ailsa Craig, Memorial University, Sociology; Dr. Alison Thompson, Dalhousie University, Chemistry; Dr. Jonathan Langdon, St. Francis Xavier University, Development Studies and Adult Education; Dr. Tim Rawlings, Cape Breton University, Biology; Dr. Peter Foley, University of Prince Edward Island, Veterinary Medicine; Dr. Marc Doucet, Saint Mary's University, Political Science; Ms. Nancy Doiron-Maillet, University of New Brunswick, Nursing; Dr. Fiona Black, Mount Allison University, Religious Studies*

**Facilitators:** Dr. Heather Sparling, Cape Breton University, Music  
Dr. Andrew Parnaby, Cape Breton University, History

After meeting on several occasions to discuss the shape of the retreat, and after soliciting ideas and suggestions from the participants, we (the facilitators) decided to focus the retreat on two topics: student evaluations of teaching, and indigenization and decolonization. As we explained to the group by way of introduction, we had several reasons for choosing these topics. First, these are very current and pressing issues. Student evaluations of teaching (SETs) are being reconsidered at universities across Canada in the wake of an Ontario arbitration that ruled in early 2018 that SETs cannot be used to measure teaching effectiveness for the purposes of promotion or tenure. Meanwhile, the indigenization and decolonization of academic institutions has been an urgent concern since the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations in 2014, and in the

wake of a June 2018 AAU report on the current state of indigenization efforts by AAU member institutions. Second, it seemed appropriate to address issues on which the participants might be called, as award-winning teachers, to provide leadership in their home institutions. Finally, recognizing that many award-winning teachers are mid-career (or later) and generally already have a developed arsenal of effective teaching techniques under their belts and identified resources to support their instructional development, we wanted to focus on topics that were challenging and philosophical in orientation. We were also conscious of choosing topics that would be relevant to faculty from diverse disciplines and teaching contexts.

We sent out a list of three short readings on each topic – all easily accessible online – that we asked participants to review in

preparation for the retreat. Recognizing how busy everyone is, we also indicated a single priority reading for each topic in case participants were unable to get to all of them. We also provided this prioritized reading in hard copy at the retreat to function as a “jumping off point” for discussion, as needed.

But before launching into these complex topics, we wanted to start with an activity that would give us a chance to start to get to know each other. We began with the question: what motivates you as a teacher? Some of the motivations identified included being inspired by great teachers in the past; introducing students to the excitement of a discipline; encouraging students to take greater risks; developing more effective learning experiences; coming to know our students as individuals; and changing structural inequalities. We (the group) also named more self-interested motivations, including dissatisfaction with traditional or conventional teaching methods; boredom; and the need to be more efficient in class preparation and marking in order to achieve a reasonable work-life balance. These latter kinds of motivations may not be given prominence in a teaching dossier but, if we are being honest, they also motivate many of us.

From this “icebreaker,” we moved into a discussion of SETs. For about 30 minutes, small groups of three discussed a series of questions posed by the facilitators: How is teaching currently being evaluated at your institution for the purposes of promotion and tenure? How might teaching be differently (better?) evaluated at your institution? What role should students have in evaluating teaching? What are the barriers/challenges to implementing different methods of teaching evaluations? We then had a large group

discussion for another 30 minutes, sharing insights that emerged in our small group discussions and extending the conversation.

One of the more interesting issues to emerge was the differences in SETs at different institutions. Some SETs are exclusively quantitative whereas others use a combination of quantitative scores and qualitative comments. Some institutions average all rankings whereas others do not. At some institutions, SETs become part of a faculty member’s official academic record made available to promotion and tenure committees whereas at other institutions, faculty are encouraged to provide SETs to such committees but not required to do so.

One theme that emerged focused on how teaching evaluations might be replaced by a more supportive and continuous form of interrogation and support. For example, faculty could be asked how they have responded (or plan to respond) to negative student feedback. Could faculty articulate what they think is working in their courses, what they plan to do next, and what they’ve implemented to improve as teachers? If faculty were expected to provide such a report on a regular basis, it would signal an institutional expectation that teaching be critically examined, and that action be taken to improve one’s teaching. Along similar lines, StFX requires faculty to submit a report that is pedagogic in orientation and that cannot be used for evaluation purposes. Faculty are encouraged to describe new teaching techniques and methods being used.

A second theme considered who should evaluate learning (as opposed to teaching) and in what way. For example, could alumni have some say since the roots of learning laid in a course may take

years to bear fruit; it's not always helpful to ask students about their learning 9 weeks into a 12-week course. At MSVU, faculty may ask to have either their course syllabus or their classes peer reviewed and they may choose their peer reviewer (from within their department). Is there potential to make better use of community members and cultural elders, particularly at a time with increasing emphasis on experiential learning?

A third theme considered the appropriate format and delivery process for teaching evaluations. While many people discussed the frustrations of online SETs and their low completion rates, we did hear about how, a number of years ago, the Chemistry Department at Dalhousie carefully developed its own online SET that was meaningful to their students and faculty. They promoted its completion with personal emails to students. Consequently, they had a 70% completion rate! However, subsequent university-wide initiatives in this area were less successful, pointing to the importance of departments when crafting such policies. One participant asked if there should be different kinds of SETs for different kinds of students, asking if it's reasonable to ask international, indigenous, and settler students to evaluate teaching in the same way? How well does a written SET work for indigenous students anyway?

We repeated the same discussion structure for our conversation on indigenization and decolonization, asking: What efforts at indigenization and decolonization have taken place at your institution? What have you personally done, if anything? What are the barriers and challenges to indigenizing and/or decolonizing your teaching, your courses, your program, your institution? How will we know when we've indigenized or decolonized our institutions? What does

success look like, and how would it be recognized?

With respect to the last question, there was general consensus that indigenization and decolonization processes will never end, and that success can only be claimed when it is recognized by our indigenous partners. We also considered how struggle and discomfort may also be markers of success as they indicate that changes are meaningful, that people are actually engaging with issues and actions, and that privilege and power are perhaps starting to shift. Indigenization and decolonization are about sharing authority: where is the seat of authority? how can that seat be shifted? what are the processes of authorization?

Many institutions have recently hired or are in the midst of hiring indigenous faculty and support staff. UNB is in the midst of hiring an Indigenous Lead who will work with a newly formed Advisory Council and who will propel initiatives related to the institution's Truth and Reconciliation Action Plan forward. Mount Allison has targeted some new faculty positions towards indigenous scholars with plans to develop an Indigenous Studies program.

We did discuss the controversy that emerged around Martha Walls at MSVU earlier this year. Dr. Walls is a white professor who was criticized for teaching a course on residential schools. MSVU released a statement noting that Dr. Walls had both Indigenous and non-Indigenous faculty support because she had designed the course to privilege first voices, Indigenous narratives, firsthand accounts and primary sources. MSVU argues that "true allies committed to honest reconciliation – like Dr. Walls – must be engaged in sharing knowledge of First Nations/Canadian history in order to

reach all those in education who should be reached with this important information.” However, the criticism aimed at Dr. Walls has made some of us and our non-Indigenous colleagues anxious about the limits of what we can reasonably and fairly do. At the same time, we recognize the unfairness of expecting the small number of Indigenous staff and faculty at our institutions to take on all the responsibilities relating to indigenization and decolonization. We struggle to identify ways in which we may help without reasserting or reinforcing existing colonial structures.

Participants appreciated the prioritized Indigenous-authored reading on indigenization and decolonization: “100 Ways: Indigenizing & Decolonizing Academic Programs” (freely available online). Although we noted the limits of a checklist format, we also recognized the value of having small, do-able steps that can be taken by anyone starting an individual path towards indigenization and decolonization. Importantly, this list identifies a range of actions that go far beyond simply integrating Indigenous content into individual courses.

Overall, although our small group discussions around indigenization and decolonization were animated, the large group discussion was more stilted than

the conversation around SETs had been. Perhaps that was due to fatigue or our lack of experiences and knowledge on these topics. Or perhaps it was due to our discomfort on these huge and complex matters, particularly in a larger group forum. The enormity of the project can be incapacitating. As faculty, we may be especially uncomfortable because our identities are built on “knowing,” on being “knowers.” What happens when we don’t know what to do? But just as we ask our students to be uncomfortable, we too can function within discomfort. Indeed, as we know, discomfort and struggles are signs of deep learning. Our discomfort may even be a sign that a shift in the location of power and authority is starting to occur. And it’s good to acknowledge the discomfort, rather than ignore it or sugarcoat it.

Just as it takes time to know what effects a course might have on students, it will take time to know how this retreat may have affected participants. However, we (the facilitators) feel that the group’s discussions were thoughtful, provocative, and honest. We hope that participants feel better prepared to contribute to meaningful discussions and actions on these topics within their home institutions over the coming months and years.