

**ASSOCIATION OF ATLANTIC UNIVERSITIES**

Institutional Award Winners' Retreat

Friday, October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2009

Acadia University

Wolfville, Nova Scotia

**Faculty Development Bulletin**

**Fall 2009**

**Participants:** *Craig Brett, Mount Allison University; Tom Macrea, Dalhousie University; Edwin MacLellan, Cape Breton University; Denise Nevo, Mount Saint Vincent University; Pedro Quijon, University of Prince Edward Island; Pawan Lingras, Saint Mary's University; Maureen Volk, Memorial University*

**Facilitators:** Dr. Angie Thompson, St. Francis Xavier University  
Dr. Peter Williams, Acadia University

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Nine outstanding teachers, professors recognized by their institutions in one way or another for their excellence in teaching, gathered on a crisp, bright Friday October afternoon at Acadia University for the annual Atlantic Association of Universities Teaching Retreat. These professors teach a range of courses from music to engineering, biology to computer science, French to economics, and physics to human kinetics. Class sizes vary for these professors ranging from individual instruction and small seminar classes to much larger classes for first through fourth year students. The teaching experience of these professors also ranged from a few years in their current positions to the

completion – or near completion – of their teaching careers. Though their fields were diverse and their teaching experiences varied in terms of length of time and class sizes, the commonality in their beliefs about the importance of their teaching was strong, powerful, and resonated in the meeting room.

Teaching philosophies were shared – first in small groups, then with the larger group. These too were diverse, though central along the themes of teaching effectively, teaching uniquely, and teaching with the students foremost in mind. These teachers are highly organized working with clear course outlines, objectives, and methods of evaluation. They know

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what they are going to teach and when, following the mapped plan, still recognizing “the better you know the map, the more side excursions, you can safely take” (M. Volk, 2009). The recognition of knowing who the students are as well as what experiences and knowledge they bring with them was a strong common thread amongst these nine professors. The belief that it is critical to learn what the students bring to the course - what they already know and what they already experienced – to not only recognize this, but to incorporate it - and then to move forward in our classes creating an environment that clearly demonstrates that we are sincerely interested in the welfare of our students, their learning, and the ability to make practical and/or effective use of this learning.

A strong distaste of the word “should” emerged in this group. *“They should know this” “They should know that” “They should work harder” “They should be in class” “They should focus better”* These were recognized as dysfunctional statements. Statements that reflect a teacher that does not recognize his or her students – that you teach students, not a subject. These statements also reflect that the professor must adapt his or her teaching methods for each new group of students because you cannot teach a course the same way twice. Yes, learning objectives remain the same; the

path to reach these objectives differs to reflect the reality of the diversity in each new class – each new student - we teach.

In our sharing of teaching philosophies, we wondered – tentatively at first, and then louder – are we natural teachers or is it something we can “study” and/or “read” about to become better? We realized that being an excellent teacher likely reflects a little bit of both. Yes, we each have a natural ability to teach, to connect – and reach out - in meaningful ways to our students in and outside of the classroom, and to effectively share our areas of expertise so that our students’ understanding of that subject has been enhanced. And yes, we make efforts to become better teachers, we read, we reflect, we discuss, we write, we experiment, we evaluate, and we present/share the resultant findings with others – formally and informally. Most of all we do not remain stagnant in what we do or how we do it. To sum, excellence in teaching then, is a bit of nature and nurture.

Following a short break, we engaged in a light game of ABCs, sharing teaching techniques or methods of engaging students – one for each letter of the alphabet (A = ask; B = brainstorm, C = closing activities, D = diagrams, E = examples, F = fun, etc.). We then shared examples of one of our

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effective teaching techniques. Recognizing the diversity of our subject areas as well as the sizes of the classes we teach, this was a dynamic discovery time as well as a confirmation of the excellence in our teaching which brought us together at this particular time. Some of us present problems (with a time limit) or self-directed projects as well as a method to effectively solving the problem/managing the project, for example, what do you we know about the problem? What do we need to know to come up with a solution? How can that solution be put into place? Others engage in interactive teaching avoiding the pitfalls of spoon feeding our students. Still others incorporate role playing, that is, ask our students to present the paper as if they were the author defending the findings or as the editor looking for ways to criticize the methodology, findings, and implications. As we engage in these teaching techniques, we are careful to look at our students; we look them in the eye and we observe their body language – do they “get it”? Do we need to provide one more example or explain it again in a different way? We are interested in our students learning and ability to apply the knowledge outside our classroom and in the real world rather than regurgitating facts and figures to us on exams. We also recognize that yes, we may perform,

particularly in a larger classroom in such a way that we “entertain” our students, however we see that not as belittling our role as educators, but rather one of the many techniques within our repertoire to engage our students in the classroom as part of the process of teaching effectively. And finally, we are interested in what our students expect of us, in asking them what those expectations are, sharing those expectations with them, and then, acting accordingly upon them.

Our discussion could be summarized with the common recognition that we are human and “teaching is a fundamental activity of all professors” (T. MacRae, 2009). Because of this sense of humanity, along with relatively strong feelings of humility, we noted a need of sharing a little of who are in what and how we teach with our students. Presenting this human side of us – that we should not be put on a pedestal – we believe is part of creating and fostering a climate in which our students are less afraid to learn and much more willing to take the risk required for them to succeed in and outside the classroom.

It was a grateful group that emerged from this three-hour retreat/discussion on teaching; grateful to have shared time with like-minded individuals, grateful to have had the

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opportunity to share personal perspectives on teaching, grateful to have learned more about the diversity of students and how others – also excellent in what they do as professor – share how and what they do to accommodate the diversities encountered in their classrooms, and perhaps, most importantly, this group of nine outstanding professors, were in a position to leave the retreat grateful to have had their beliefs in the importance of teaching confirmed, acknowledged, and bolstered.

**PARTICIPANTS:**

**Craig Brett**, *Mount Allison University*

**Tom Macrea**, *Dalhousie University*

**Edwin MacLellan**, *Cape Breton University*

**Denise Nevo**, *Mount Saint Vincent University*

**Pedro Quijon**, *University of Prince Edward Island*

**Pawan Lingras**, *Saint Mary's University*

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