

focus

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Award-Winning Teachers Reflect

It probably is not said often or loudly enough: **Dalhousie University has many outstanding teachers.** Fourteen teaching awards are given annually by various departments and faculties, while the Dalhousie University Instructional Leadership Award, instituted in 1994, recognizes an individual who has made a considerable contribution to the enhancement of university teaching. This issue of *Focus* celebrates the achievements of some of Dalhousie's award-winning professors and teaching assistants. In their own words, they describe their philosophies of and approaches to the craft in which they excel.

Approach to and Philosophy of Teaching

Jonathan Blay
Department of Pharmacology

Dr. Blay was selected as the 1994 Medicine Class Year III Professor of the Year.

My central belief is that there is no such thing as "teaching," in the sense that material can be actively transmitted to a passive audience. We can only hope to facilitate and optimize the learning process of those who are acquiring the knowledge.

My approach to didactic teaching in undergraduate classes, therefore, stems from the feelings that each lecture (i) should motivate the students to appreciate and build on the knowledge being considered; (ii) should be enjoyable; and (iii) should present the knowledge in a way

that can be readily assimilated and utilized for future reference.

To satisfy the first objective, I tailor my approach to the composition of the class and its goals. The style of lecturing clearly differs between, say, medicine and a fourth - year general science class. In my teaching of pharmacology, I am careful to set a context that is consistent with the ultimate goals of the students. It is not difficult, for example, to focus an explanation of the mechanisms of action and toxicities of antineoplastic drugs on the oral mucosa for the benefit of students in dentistry.

To make my lectures more enjoyable, I make extensive use of humour and humorous overheads. This seems to be appreciated. Apart from enhancing the class atmosphere, the occasional aside or break for a cartoon has the effect of increasing attention. There are two important points to be taken into account. First, the humour must fit in with the topic and not disrupt the development of an argument. Second, time must not be wasted. I pass by many potential asides because they would not fit in with the overall content of the lecture, or would use too much time.

To improve the presentation and clarity of my lectures, I have made some effort to optimize handouts and overheads. I provide each class with a handout that contains an outline of the material and includes all important information that is at risk of being mis-recorded (names of drugs, target enzymes, etc.) and anything that would take excessive time to note down (drug structures, metabolic pathways, etc.). This pre-



Spencer Greenwood, Carol King, and Paula Wedge, winners of the 1993-94 President's Graduate Teaching Assistant Award, were congratulated for their outstanding contribution to teaching and learning at Dalhousie University by Dr. Judith Fingard, Dean of Graduate Studies, and President Howard Clark. A reception to honour all of Dalhousie's teaching award winners was organized by the OI DT.

vents the lecture from becoming a note-taking race, and allows the students to concentrate on the information. However, I deliberately leave large gaps within the handout, in which the students must record the necessary knowledge as they appreciate a point. In particular, I leave blanks where I wish to develop an argument systematically (e.g., in generating and using a graph to show the rationale for antineoplastic drug dosing). I began using this approach soon after realizing that complete handouts encouraged passive attention. Feedback from classes led to the right balance of information and space. My overheads are direct reproductions from the handouts, making it easy to follow the course of the oral presentation. This approach has proven popular with all students, who end up with one coherent set of notes. It has also been adopted by colleagues with similar success.

T.A.'s Reflect on Their Teaching

Spencer Greenwood, a recipient of the 1993-94 President's Graduate Teaching Assistant Award, recently graduated with a Ph.D. in Biochemistry.

I have always believed in the "any hours" policy; that is, I make myself available to students whenever they need help. If for some reason they cannot reach me on campus, they know that I can

be contacted at home at any hour. My reason for this openness is that university life is very structured with lectures, laboratories, tutorials, and of course exams (let alone the fact that some people must work evenings to support their education). Therefore, a student may not find time to study or review notes during the normal working day (whatever that is). If I make myself available outside the laboratory, the students are more likely to ask questions and this may give them the individual attention they need to improve, become more comfortable with me as an individual, and possibly encourage them to ask questions in the future.

I have been very fortunate to have had good teaching role models in both my graduate supervisors. Therefore, I view my teaching abilities as a reflection of what I have learned from observing them; I hope that I can become as effective as they are.

Carol King, a winner of the 1993-94 President's Graduate Teaching Assistant Award, taught in the secondary school system before returning to Dalhousie to do graduate work in Classics.

I firmly believe that, if a teacher shows interest in students' work and development, students in turn will show more interest in their own work and development.

In my experience—teaching at the secondary and university levels—I have found that many students are unaware of their potential and take little pride in the learning process. With encouragement, sometimes much encouragement, many of these students will respond. The material must be made relevant, which often means “visible,” as well as interesting, and the learner must be taught self-worth. I came to believe that the education system should teach young people, beyond knowledge, how to discover themselves, their talents, and even sometimes their limitations. A variety of approaches must be used to achieve this: one method alone cannot work for every situation or every student, and a teacher must listen to the needs of students.

I believe that students must be comfortable with the learning process and should be challenged for real growth to take place. I also believe that the learning process never ends; as a teacher I still have much to learn.

Paula Wedge, a winner of the 1993-94 President's Graduate Teaching Assistant Award, is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Chemistry.

The undergraduate laboratory is a unique environment for a teaching assistant. It allows you to cater to the needs of individual students and to adjust the time spent with each student depending on his or her needs. To be a good teaching assistant, it is very important to be knowledgeable and to be able to communicate that knowledge effectively. It is even more important to be approachable in the introductory classes. If students do not feel comfortable seeking your help and advice, you cannot be an effective teaching assistant.

But from my other experiences, I know that effective communication and approachability will not be enough if I become a professor. I must show my enthusiasm for the subject and keep my students interested by presenting the material in a dynamic way. When I think back to the professors from whom I have learned most during my

years at Dalhousie, I would say that these qualities in their approach to teaching have inspired me. I hope their approach will work for me as well.

Teaching Philosophy

Wayne MacKay
Faculty of Law

Professor MacKay is the recipient of the 1993 Dalhousie Law Students' Society & Alumni Association Award for Excellence in Teaching and the 1994 Canadian Association of Law Teachers Award for Academic Excellence.

My teaching is somewhat eclectic and resists a neat philosophical classification. I will attempt to identify some themes which emerge from my teaching and let others determine whether these themes constitute any coherent pattern.

At the outset, I would state that teachers impart more by way of example than precept and that students are very perceptive in recognizing when a teacher does not practice what (s)he preaches. There are several values that I try to teach students both by my words and my actions. Included among these are the following: the importance of organization, preparation, and homework; respect for other people and their views; the public service obligations of the lawyer; the value of clear and effective communication

in both written and oral form; the importance of fair process; the centrality of equality, to name but a few.

Another important theme of

my teaching is to emphasize the value of critical scholarship, which not only clearly describes the present state of the law but explores what the law should be. I make a point of including in my in-house case books (prepared from scratch and revised every year) scholarship that questions and challenges the state of the law as presented in the statutes, regulations, and cases. I also encourage students in their own research papers to move beyond the mere description of the present state

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Carol King

of the law to make constructive suggestions for law reform.

While it may sound cliché, I try to teach in a human and humane fashion. Unless there is a climate of mutual respect in the classroom, students will be very reluctant to add to the conversation. Feedback suggests that I have had some success in creating a learning environment in which students feel safe yet stimulated. This means they are free to contribute to the class and develop their ideas. One of my objectives is to do my small part to humanize the law and remind students that the law is really about resolving people's problems.

A final theme in my teaching which I will emphasize is teaching in an inclusive fashion. In the 1990's and beyond we must take account of diversity in our teaching. This means that whom we teach, what we teach, and how we teach must take account of equity concerns and celebrate the diversity of our student body.

Teaching Style

Joan Conrod

Professor of Accounting at Dalhousie's
School of Business Administration

Professor Conrod is a two-time recipient of the Commerce Professor of the Year Award (for 1992-93 and 1993-94).

I bring a lot of energy to my class. If I can't get excited about my subject, why should my students? There are a number of things I try to accomplish for my students:

1. **A positive atmosphere.** Students are called upon to discuss questions, but mistakes are treated as opportunities to explore misconceptions, not as reflections of a student's abilities.

2. **A window on the world.** Almost any event which you can link to the business world (The Exxon Valdez, the collapse of Olympia and York, etc.) has accounting implications. Examples such as these are used to remind the students that accounting is the language of business, and the events that must be described are, at times, quite dramatic.

3. **Fair playing field.** I go to some lengths (individualizing computer assignments, etc.) to ensure that students know that everyone is expected to do the work.

4. **Access to a caring individual.** No, I don't know all their names. But when I am teaching 190+ undergraduates, I work with my office door open, and I am available to help.

5. **Computer troubleshooting.** Many students give up on computer exercises in total frustration when they reach an impasse. I try to be available, both at scheduled lab times and in impromptu "walk arounds" through the labs, to ensure that students learn from the computer exercises.

6. **Empowerment.** I believe that anyone can do well in accounting if he or she is willing to spend time at it. Some pick it up quickly; some need to spend more time. I encourage all my students to be interested enough in the subject to invest more time. Then, I try to make sure they spend their time productively.

7. **Respect.** Students work hard, earn their grades, and are entitled to their opinions. My task is to facilitate their learning process.



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