

focus

on university teaching and learning

Volume 6, Number 2

Teaching Excellence: Focus on Our Award Winning Teachers

Once each year, *FOCUS* brings you reflections on teaching from Dalhousie faculty and graduate teaching assistants who have received awards for excellence in teaching or for instructional leadership. In this issue, novice teachers describe the characteristics of a good teacher, two experienced teachers describe their own approaches and experiences, and a third challenges the university community to consider ways to improve education at Dalhousie.

Getting Started . . .

Graduate Teaching Assistants talk about teaching

Aleixo Muise, a recipient of the 1995-96 President's Graduate Teaching Assistant Award, is a PhD student in the Department of Biochemistry. Students and faculty praise his comprehensive explanations, approachability, thorough knowledge of the subject, enthusiastic and conscientious manner, and commitment to teaching excellence.

The teachers I have encountered during the course of my education whom I remember and respect are those who exemplified teaching excellence. These role models facilitated learning through a genuine concern for their students. I have modelled my own teaching style and philosophy along the same lines. I have attempted to treat each student with respect, while endeavouring to teach at a level that is most beneficial to their individual needs. At the same time, I have tried to encourage an enthusiasm for the subject material which is a necessary prerequisite for effective learning. Every student is different, each with a unique understanding of the principles and material presented; therefore, it is necessary to gauge their knowl-

edge and basic understanding before attempting to illustrate difficult material. To effectively teach students, I have found that first presenting the material in a simple manner, then building up to more complex principles, allows students to grasp and retain difficult concepts. In my experience, this has been an effective and satisfying approach.

Mary Chan, a recipient of the 1995-96 President's Graduate Teaching Assistant Award, is a PhD student in the Department of Chemistry. She has been praised for her professionalism, approachability, interest in developing students' critical thinking skills, and for her sensitivity to students' varying abilities and backgrounds.

One of the most important characteristics of a good teacher is being prepared for the job. This means not only knowing the material well, but also being able to deliver it in a clear and enthusiastic manner. The teacher should come across as confident, but at the same time be able to admit mistakes and to say, "I don't know the answer to that question, but I'll find out for you." It is also important to appreciate the fact that students have different learning styles. They are in-

dividuals with various abilities and should be treated with respect. A good teacher is, therefore, receptive to the students' needs and has several alternative explanations to fall back on if necessary.

Growth and Development . . .

Experienced teachers talk about their work

Professor Joan Conrod, School of Business Administration, was the recipient of three teaching awards in 1995-96: Commerce Professor of the Year, the Alumni Award of Excellence for Teaching, and the Association of Atlantic Universities' Distinguished Teacher Award.

Why don't we spend much time talking about our university teaching?

Perhaps it's because, for many of us, it's our second career. We see ourselves as a chemist or an accountant first, and a teacher only after the fact. Maybe we don't want to be teachers. Maybe also teaching has a certain stigma associated with it: "He who can, does. He who can't, teaches." Or perhaps we're worried about being confused with those other teachers — the ones who get their summers off! It's a sad commentary on how ill-understood university professors are as a profession: the fact is that we do teach, and we do a lot more, too. We have reason to be proud of this fact.

Some want to avoid the responsibility by citing the "highly motivated students" line. One's students are supposed to be so bright and willing to work that their learning is not dependent on teaching. "I shouldn't have to do that," the professor snorts.

Maybe we all secretly believe that good teachers are born, not made. Do we believe that teaching can't be taught? That there's some magic DNA code that produces a stellar teacher? If so, the rest of us might just as well stop talking about it, or working at it, because we'll never make it. Personally, I benefited from a series of intensive teaching workshops that, sadly, were not provided by a university. These learning opportunities had a tremendous impact on my teaching style and focus. I wish they were more prevalent.

When you teach, you get to peel the layers off the onion that represents your professional competencies. You

have the opportunity to reconstruct the onion with the unique perspective of fresh students' minds, and to admire both its component parts and its entirety. This opportunity pays dividends: "He who teaches, learns twice."

Take pride in your teaching task. Work at it, as it has the potential for tremendous payback.

Dr. Ian Mobbs, Department of Anatomy and Neurobiology, is the co-recipient of the 1995-96 Dalhousie University Instructional Leadership Award. He teaches in the Case-Oriented Problem-Solving (COPS) programme in the Faculty of Medicine.

The curriculum in my Faculty changed four years ago to one that centred around problems that generate a need to know in students who are responsible for their education. This change started off for me as an exciting but scary way of teaching anatomy — "you mean I'll not lecture on everything?" It has developed into a stimulating and still exciting way of learning for students and for me.

Is it more effective? I think I'll have to dodge the direct question for the moment as so much depends on what is inferred by effective. What I can comment on are some of the challenges and thoughts that I am experiencing in this change.

There were and still are a number of challenges: How does one relax and believe that everything a student learns does not have to come through the instructor? That there are many ways of learning and that they may involve cooperation between peers and professors? That students can and should be involved with their own learning? (After all, that is what happens in life outside the university!) How does one plan and implement learning experiences which balance the need to cover the fundamentals of the subject with the specific, but varied, needs of students pursuing diverse career paths? These are some of the challenges that for me have revitalized an ancient discipline.

Trying to meet these challenges has exemplified what a university education encompasses and encourages: students taking responsibility for how they learn, being stimulated to search for knowledge, learning how to use a variety of resources (libraries, labs, or personnel). It is gratifying to see the enthusiasm of students in the COPS programme not just acquiring knowledge

to pass an exam but learning to identify and solve complex, real-world problems and appreciating a need to know. The sense of the lecturer being "the driver" is fading and being replaced by one of the teacher as a guide who has knowledge and experience and who provides criticism and support.

Is this approach a more effective way of learning? I don't have a simple answer, but without wanting to sound like an evangelist, this approach has certainly captured for me the analytical and logical approaches that we prize within universities.

Reflecting on Institutional Change. . .

What Could Be Done to Enhance the Undergraduate Learning Experience at Dalhousie?

Dale Retallack, Department of Engineering, is the co-recipient of the 1995-96 Dalhousie Engineering Professor Appreciation Award. He first won this award in 1990.

The question of how to enhance the undergraduate learning experience was posed recently in our Department and Faculty, and it struck me as a question well worth asking — especially if one believes that well-educated students are among the most important "finished products" of our institution.

Evidently, some of the following items may seem more relevant to Engineering than to other disciplines. Perhaps even more obviously, many of these items will be labeled by some as impractical for budgetary reasons. At this point, I would ask just how serious we (collectively) are about improving undergraduate education.

At any rate, some suggestions are offered here. This will not be an exhaustive list, but might at least provoke some serious discussion about our priorities and responsibilities as an educational institution.

• We might go back and re-read the report generated by President Clark's Committee on Undergraduate Education in 1989; it was filled with positive recommendations, many of which might not have been implemented as yet. (You can borrow a copy of the Report from OI DT.)

• We should return to the use of province-wide Provincial Examinations in High School, and/or institute some other sort of Admission Tests (like the American SATs, for example), perhaps especially in English and Mathematics.

The spectrum of "levels of preparedness" of our students is far too broad for us to be able to challenge the more able persons properly without leaving large numbers of people far behind in the dust. Indeed, many of our students appear to be unable to read or write at all capably, even in their second year at Dalhousie. (And many of our first-year writing classes now comprise some 50 students, compared to 25 or so not long ago.)

For similar reasons, the standards for advancement from one year to the next should be suitably challenging.

• We might remind ourselves that the objectives of undergraduate education include the following: learning to think, learning to communicate, acquiring an appropriately broad education, and acquiring the skills and commitment needed to support lifelong learning (Report of the Committee on Undergraduate Education, 1989). These are all "skill" items, not "content" items. Those of us who design and deliver programmes in the technical disciplines are inclined perhaps especially to forget this.

• We should consider seriously the idea of offering first year programmes to help new students adjust to and succeed with university life. In a "real-world," non-academic environment, one would not expect successful performance from people unless they were properly prepared for the task at the outset. Why should academic life be any different? A first year programme (which could be compulsory and/or for credit) would aim to help students to:

- understand the objectives to be attained,
- understand and accept their own personal roles and responsibilities,
- be properly trained in the skills and techniques which lead to success, and
- be properly motivated to do the job.

We currently offer some support in these areas (like the recently instituted mentors' programme and others offered by Student Services), but are these really suffi-

cient? Surely a more deliberate and comprehensive system could greatly enhance our students' chances at success and greatly reduce our attrition rates? An article in the November 1996 issue of *University Affairs* provides some basic information about some of the first-year programmes presently underway at a number of universities.

- There must be room for a lot more project / design / skills-based classes and programmes, and for much broader application of collaborative / group learning practices.

- Our students need time, and need to be challenged, to breathe and think and wonder. In our programme, at any rate, I often think that we keep people far too busy to allow them to really experience university in all the ways that they should.

- We need to find ways of moving students away from having to work long hours earning money to support themselves while trying to carry full course loads at the same time. We also need to wrestle with the problems created by the heavy burdens of student loans in the climate created by our present highly competitive job market, and to talk about our responsibilities with regard to the expectations of students and their families. It seems to me that there exists too much false hope and false expectation

- We need to continue to work on the reward system

(tenure, promotion, salary . . .) to ensure that teaching and learning receive the appropriate priority in as many peoples' minds as possible, at all levels in the organization. This was one of the major themes of a recent article by Alan Wright and Carol O'Neil in *FOCUS*, Volume 6, Number 1, reporting the results of surveys undertaken at Dalhousie, across Atlantic Canada, and beyond. Of course, significant advances have been made at Dalhousie in recent years—e.g. the official recognition of scholarly activity in teaching and learning areas, the possibility of promotion to Full Professor "principally on the ground that the Member has attained and is likely to maintain a high level of effectiveness in teaching" (Collective Agreement 1990), the use of teaching dossiers in tenure and promotion cases, and the creation of various teaching awards. But have we done enough to affect the priority system in a truly significant way? (Indeed, do we all necessarily agree that we should do so?)

Evidently, many relevant items have not been included in the above list. We could address a host of other issues which affect our work as educators: e.g., the question of class sizes, the ever-more-extensive use of multiple-choice exams, issues regarding teaching equipment and contributions to be expected (and not) from advanced technology, what can be done to help teach the teachers to teach, questions of workload and morale across campus. However, perhaps this will have provided some useful food for thought.



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Dalhousie's Award-winning teachers were honoured at the Sixth Annual Celebration of University Teaching on November 28, 1996.



Left to right: **Tom Boran**, Dental Clinical Sciences, (W.W. Wood Award for Excellence in Dental Education), **Jim MacKinnon**, Engineering, (Dalhousie Engineering Professor Appreciation Award), **Mary Chan**, Chemistry, (The President's Graduate Teaching Assistant Award), **Ian Mobbs**, Anatomy and Neurobiology, (Medical Students' Society Professor of the Year Award & Dalhousie University Instructional Leadership Award), **Alexio Mulise**, Biochemistry, (The President's Graduate Teaching Assistant Award), **Dale Retallack**, Engineering, (Dalhousie Engineering Professor Appreciation Award), **Joan Conrod**, Business Administration, (School of Business Administration Professor of the Year Award; the Alumni Award for Excellence in Teaching, and the Association of Atlantic Universities Distinguished Teacher Award), President **Tom Traves**, and **Susan Mansour**, Pharmacy, (the Dalhousie University Instructional Leadership Award).



Neil Fleming, Director of the Education Centre at Lincoln University, New Zealand started the Sixth Annual Celebration of University Teaching with a lively presentation entitled "Cheers!" which focused on important trends in higher education and their impact on teaching and learning. Fleming, visiting professor with the Office of Instructional Development and Technology, reported on findings and observations gleaned from his recent visits to universities in Australia, Switzerland, Great Britain, and the USA.



Alexio Muise (Biochemistry), a winner of the 1996 President's Graduate Teaching Assistant Award, is congratulated by Vice-President (Academic & Research) **Deborah Hobson**.



Ian Mobbs, Department of Anatomy and Neurobiology, is the 1996 recipient of the Medical Students' Society Professor of the Year Award and co-recipient of the Dalhousie University Instructional Leadership Award.



Mary Chan, (Chemistry) is a 1996 winner of the President's Graduate Teaching Assistant Award.



Joan Conrad (Business Administration) is the 1996 recipient of the School of Business Administration Professor of the Year Award, the Alumni Award for Excellence in Teaching, and the Association of Atlantic Universities Distinguished Teacher Award.