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Awards for Excellence in Teaching

2008

**Presentations to the
Atlantic University Presidents**

**by the recipients of the
2008 Association of Atlantic Universities**

Distinguished Teaching Award

Dr. Martin van Bommel
Department of Mathematics, Statistics, and
Computer Science
St. Francis Xavier University

Dr. Elizabeth Wells
Department of Music
Mount Allison University

Instructional Leadership Award

Dr. Adam Sarty
Department of Astronomy & Physics
Saint Mary's University

The Importance of Good Teaching - The Importance of Teaching the Individual

by

Dr. Martin F. van Bommel

Department of Mathematics, Statistics, and Computer Science
St. Francis Xavier University

In my teaching philosophy, I echo the analogy employed by Dr. Pierre Zundel of the University of New Brunswick's Renaissance College in his acceptance speech for the 2002 AAU Instructional Leadership Award: "Teaching is like gardening." Being recognized as a "Distinguished Teacher" is my "Blue Ribbon" for many great crops of students during my fifteen years of teaching. Too bad the same can not be earned for my backyard vegetable garden crops.

Having had a number of years to contemplate my own teaching, and now being asked to speak on the importance of good teaching, I have one word that keeps coming to my mind – "Individual." Not the individual teacher, but the individual student. I believe that my teaching greatly improved when I realized my focus should not be on me, the teacher, nor on the material I was expected to deliver. No, my focus needed to shift to each individual student. It was only then that I shifted from being what students once referred to as an "arrogant professor" to what they now claim is a "great teacher."

In retrospect, it is rather surprising that I had to learn this lesson after I started teaching. Being the youngest in a family of thirteen children, I learned early on in my life the value of being treated as an individual. During my undergraduate program at StFX, it was the individual treatment of my professors that inspired me to pursue a career in academia with a focus on teaching. Dr. Douglas Hunter, my first-year physics professor and a 2002 recipient of the AAU Distinguished Teacher award, was one such inspiration. Despite having a large class consisting of students with widely varying backgrounds, interests, abilities, learning styles, degrees of preparation, and future plans, Doug was able to reach each individual and leave a lasting impression. I owe a debt of gratitude to Doug and to the many other professors I encountered during my undergraduate program at StFX who left a similar impression. I also owe almost as much to those whose lasting

impression was much less favorable, for they also helped shape my teaching in their own special ways.

Let us go back to the idea of the individual. It is worthwhile to note that turning one's focus from the whole class to the individual students automatically leads to the implementation of a variety of teaching styles. Although many professors will argue that one particular teaching style is more effective than others for their subject matter, it can only be said that one style might be more effective for the majority of the students. In fact, the employment of only one style in a class will succeed to fully alienate those students for whom the style might be ineffective. Indeed, a professor must reach out to the individuals in this smaller group and discover what is effective for each of them. It is all too easy to cater to the majority, and let the others slip through the cracks. It is much more difficult to work to discover the variety of styles that provide each and every student with the opportunity to truly appreciate the subject matter.

In my own home, the concept of individuality is reinforced every day. My wife Dianne and I were quick to learn that our three children are distinct individuals, and what works for one does not necessarily work for another. However, it did come as quite a surprise for us to discover that Rebecca, our youngest child, does not share the same aptitude for Mathematics held by her two brothers. Mathematics always came easily to Christopher, and Matthew was never far behind. So Rebecca's first struggles with the subject led us to the realization that she did not respond the same way to the specific teaching styles that worked so well for her brothers. Now she has come to grasp the subject in her own way.

As for my students, it was my focus on the individual that led to the diversity of the group that supplied letters in support for my nomination. One of the letters is from a former student who I employed as a summer research

assistant. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Computer Science at the University of Alberta. A second letter is from a student who went on to earn an Education degree, and is currently teaching high school Mathematics in Yellowknife. A third letter is from a married couple who, after going through the Computer Science program at StFX, went on to pursue law degrees. Each of these students gives me credit for helping them find their true calling and providing the necessary support and encouragement to pursue it. The diversity of the career paths pursued by my students illustrates that good teaching not only leads to learning, but also to self discovery. I believe it is my interaction with students outside the classroom that contributed the most to this award, but also that this interaction grows out of the individual treatment provided inside of the classroom.

Let us return for a moment to the phrase once used by my students to describe my early attempts in front of the classroom – “arrogant professor.” The phrase is somewhat redundant. After all, a “professor” is defined as a “person who declares oneself to be an expert in some field.” So how can a young, newly-minted Ph.D. not be arrogant? On the other hand, the phrase used by my students more recently – “great teacher” – does not really fit the role I strive to fill. After all, a teacher is one who “imparts knowledge,” and I see my role more as a “facilitator of learning,” although the title “Distinguished Facilitator of Learning” does not roll off the tongue quite as well.

I was asked to speak on the importance of good teaching. In my view, this includes what is done not only in the classroom, but also the lab, tutorial, and office, as well as the interaction with students outside formal settings. A good teacher takes on the roles of teacher, lecturer, facilitator,

mentor, counselor, and friend, providing guidance, support, advice, and encouragement, while listening to the concerns of students. If done properly, a student should be left not only with additional knowledge of the subject matter, but also with a further appreciation for learning, and more confidence and self-awareness.

I conclude with the observation that I am very fortunate to have landed at StFX, a primarily undergraduate university, where teaching is highly valued, and class sizes have assisted my efforts to fill the roles I believe are required to fully interact with students on an individual basis. StFX is a haven for great teachers, and I have been blessed to be able to interact with them, first as a student, and now as a colleague.

Finally, I would be remiss without expressing my gratitude. First, thanks are extended to the Association of Atlantic Universities, for the honour of this Award, and to the Faculty Development Committee at StFX for supporting my nomination. I would also like to thank my wonderful students over the past fifteen years, including those who provided the constructive criticism, and especially those who made the effort to nominate me for this award. I thank my children for making me treat each of them as individuals, and for being so understanding when I am not always available for them. But most of all, I thank the most important individual in my life, my wife Dianne, who not only put up with me during my post-graduate studies, but helped me through the difficult early years of teaching with many words of encouragement, and continues to tolerate a great deal in my current role as Chair of my Department. I hope to someday be able to give her all the individual treatment she so richly deserves.

The Importance of Good Teaching - The Teacher as the Leader of Tomorrow

by

Dr. Elizabeth Wells

Department of Music, Mount Allison University

I would like to thank the AAU for this wonderful award and for the Association's support of teaching throughout our region. Speaking on the topic of "The Importance of Good Teaching" lends itself naturally to a number of approaches, from trying to define what one means by good teaching, to arguing for more institutional and financial support for teaching and teaching centres, or to talking about one's own practices and what one thinks is important about one's own teaching. But I'd like to take a different approach tonight and talk about what good teaching, and particularly good teachers, can do for an institution and for higher education in general.

Although there is much good and excellent teaching going on in our universities these days, it is easy to forget that good teaching comes from good people – people with a sense of service, the ability to create positive change, and the desire to make the world a better place. Reading through their teaching philosophies and hearing them present at conferences, I find these same passions reiterated over and over again from our best teachers. But what I'd like to discuss tonight is how these same qualities and passions can contribute more to a university than just good classes. I'd like to imagine how we can take the same qualities that we find in good teachers and apply them to leadership roles in higher education.

Good teachers know how to make something out of nothing. They can take a less than successful student presentation or an awkward question and find a teaching moment there, expanding on the topic or filling in what is missing without making the student feel embarrassed or inadequate. Good teachers know how to let a silence hang in the air, to wait for an answer to a posed question, to let a situation breathe so that when the silence ends it is filled with something relevant and insightful. Good teachers know when to push and know when to lay off, because they learn to read people and to sense the right moment when a humorous comment or an aside will diffuse tension or boredom in a room, or when a student needs to be either pushed harder or given some breathing room. Good teachers are often shy but

they know how to work a room. They have learned that the world is made up of unique individuals who have their own style of communication, their own needs; their own culture. Good teachers know that they have to back up what they do in the classroom with sound research and up-to-date information. They know how to give feedback so that the person being assessed doesn't feel threatened, but instead inspired to do better the next time and to learn from individual successes and mistakes. A good teacher knows how to fire the enthusiasm and passion of students in even the driest or most difficult subjects, without descending to gimmicks or watering down the subject. A good teacher knows how to really listen to someone, to put themselves in someone else's place, to come up with ways to help or guide a student when that student feels lost or alone in his or her work. Good teachers inspire confidence, whether it be in the lectures they give, the marks they assign, or in trying to sell students on an innovative methodology or new ideas. They give themselves entirely to their work, putting in long hours and going the extra mile to make sure they do the best for their students. And, good teachers don't do it for the glory, or for the awards, although they are honoured to receive them, but because they feel called to teach on a deeply personal level.

I don't want to emphasize the binary opposition that many feel between teaching and research, or more specifically the perceived ontological difference between "teachers" and "researchers." But those two endeavours often require very different mindsets and attitudes. Researchers have to put their research first – it takes a great deal of time and effort to be successful as a research scholar, and the nature of scholarship is that there are winners and losers. New discoveries and new ideas are published so that they challenge or change existing knowledge, and so researchers often have to guard very carefully their research findings and present them strategically to get their due as the owners of their intellectual property. Conferences often include legendary arguments between famous scholars who disagree on fundamental, or not so

fundamental, aspects of each other's scholarship. Michel Foucault's early works are written in an extremely complex and dense prose, because that's the way he had to write to break into the French intellectual scene. Only once he was established did he start writing in ways that non-academics could understand. There's nothing essentially wrong with this way of approaching the world or one's work, indeed it is the foundation of intellectual life as we know it. But it tends to be an attitude that leads the scholar into increasing complexity. The mindset of people who we tend to label as "teachers" is entirely different – it is about breaking down those boundaries, making things accessible and understandable, sharing knowledge freely and cutting through the density. They don't simplify the material, but they make it available to people who are at first novices. Even though teachers spend solitary time preparing their courses, they are always looking outward, ceaselessly thinking about how to make their research and the research of others understandable to as many people as they can.

Although it is common for brilliant researchers to take on responsibilities as department heads, deans, vice presidents or even Presidents such as yourselves, I think we tend to want to keep teachers in the classroom, the place where they excel, the place where we feel they are most needed. But the very skills, the attitudes, and the activities that good teachers engage in every day are precisely the skills that we need most within the leadership roles in our institutions. Consider this: when a Chair can take all her department's constituents and bring them together for productive and efficient meetings, that's not just good communication, that's good teaching. When you can break the news to a colleague that he did not receive tenure, but can turn that meeting around so that you help him to move on to another position, that's not just good mentorship, that's good teaching. When faculty and administrators' research, planning, and passionate engagement results in a collective agreement that is fair to all parties, that's not just good negotiation, that's good teaching. When a Dean shepherds a new mission or vision of a unit or a faculty and brings everyone on board, even those traditionally resistant to change, that's not just good leadership, that's good teaching. When you convince a major donor through honesty, directness and diplomacy to fund a major building project that will transform your campus and

community, that's not just good salesmanship, that's good teaching. And when a Provost creates a detailed plan for an institutional review and takes all the financial, academic, and human factors into consideration, that's not just good administration, that's good teaching. All the things we want and need in these roles are things that good teachers do naturally, tirelessly, every day.

So, instead of loading your good teachers with more courses, start thinking about bringing them into other arenas of the university – from spearheading committees on curricular reform, to leading academic units, to working with External on major campaigns. At first, this will be hard to do. People love to do what they love to do, so taking a teacher out of the classroom may be a hard sell at first, especially with the promise of lots of paperwork and meetings on the other side. But if you can let good teachers see that the results they get in their classrooms and the way they change lives could be applied to even more students, to even more teachers, and to even more constituents within and outside the University, they start to see what good teaching can do for our universities. They can see that the dream that drives them all – to make the world a better place – can be realized through service in a much larger classroom. Make sure that they still have opportunities to do traditional teaching, but don't let this goldmine of talent stay only within classroom walls, never taking part in making policies, creating vision, and guiding missions.

One of the great challenges of this era in higher education, as you well know, is the recruitment and retention of students. Without our students we have no future, neither economically nor intellectually. And what good students want in a University is good teachers. No one looks back on their 20-year college reunion remarking on the number of NSERC grants their professors received, or the sheen on a lovely new floor in a dining hall, or even a well-stocked library. The thing they remember, and the thing that brings their children back to that institution after them, is good teachers and good teaching – the people who shaped and changed their lives and their world. This is an exciting moment of opportunity for our institutions – let's hand the reigns over to our teachers and watch them lead us into tomorrow.

The Importance of Good Teaching - and the Conflict it Reveals

by

Dr. Adam Sarty

Department of Astronomy & Physics , Saint Mary's University

It is a tremendous honour to be speaking to you tonight as this year's recipient of the AAU's Anne Marie MacKinnon Instructional Leadership Award, and I would like to express my most sincere "thank you" to the AAU for its continued support and encouragement of "good university teaching" through its teaching award program. Before I begin tackling the task of discussing my views on Good Teaching, let me start by acknowledging some of the many people who have supported, guided, and taught me over the past years in my teaching activities ... I want to start here because it is clear to me that Awards such as these recognize much more than individuals – they recognize "teams"; and without my own "team", there would be no way that I could be here tonight, with my name sharing this Award with all of the exceptional people who have received it before me. My teaching team, like most other aspects of my life, reflects a balance between my home and my university families:

- ▶ My wife, Diane MacKenzie, has (and continues to have!) the single biggest influence on my teaching. Diane is an Occupational Therapist who "converted" from clinical work to university teaching 8 years ago when we moved to Halifax as I joined the faculty at Saint Mary's. She is an incredible teacher, and we have had innumerable discussions related to university teaching;
- ▶ My children, Julia and Isabel, continue to show me as they grow through their childhood all the many ways that people learn, and that learning really is fun;
- ▶ Malcolm Butler, my colleague and Dean at Saint Mary's, has provided unwavering support for my teaching activities ever since I arrived at SMU;
- ▶ Margaret-Anne Bennett, and the Saint Mary's Center for Academic and Instructional Development, have provided the backbone for any/all "across campus" initiatives I've been associated

with over the past 8 years; and,

- ▶ The rest of my department, students, and university for providing an atmosphere that has been very supportive of all "Good Teaching" pursuits.

With these acknowledgments done, let me turn to "Good Teaching", and why I believe it reveals Conflict – and, in this discussion, I think you may see why I referred to my "teaching team", and why I was compelled to begin tonight by introducing them.

Let me tell you first about my own route to university teaching. As a senior undergraduate, I was fortunate to have connected with a faculty mentor who got me into summer research positions within my department at Univ. of Saskatchewan. Inspired by this research experience, I entered graduate school, where I received frequent personal and direct interaction with my thesis advisor...and received similar interaction with my post-doctoral research advisor at MIT. By the end of my post-doctoral term, I was – as far as I understood - perfectly prepared to enter university faculty with the qualifications of having an established research record, a research program to build on that had an eminently fundable future. And it appeared I was correct, having no difficulty in landing that first faculty job. Then: a Conflict – I faced the sudden reality that all of the "perfect preparation" and personal-grooming I'd received was all about research, and had not mentioned teaching...perhaps my case is extreme, but I think it is not out of the ordinary, at least in the physical sciences: I became an Assistant Professor having zero teaching experience. So the Conflict was internal – I defined myself as a researcher, a "nuclear physicist", yet to do this, was thrust into the reality that I needed to also teach.

On top of this, I saw an externalization of this Conflict when I talked with my friends and neighbours outside of academe. People would ask what I did, and I would reply (as I always had), "I am a nuclear physicist." When they then

found out I did this through my position as a professor at the university, people tended to be confused, asking, "Is there a lot of demand to teach nuclear physics?". You see, their – the public's – understanding of a university professor is dominated by the view that we teach. When I explained that only a small amount of my teaching was related to nuclear physics, and the rest to teaching introductory and other kinds of physics, the general reaction I got (and still do) is a reasonable question: "Oh, where did you learn to teach?". Good question, indeed! This external Conflict is clearly between a public view that the role of professors is primarily to teach, and a new professor's view that they were hired primarily to do research. The public view is understandable; with university tuition continuing to increase, it is reasonable to expect that this ever-increasing amount of money buys, at least, the primary attention of the professors teaching the courses. But the new professor's view is also understandable, for being a researcher is what traditionally differentiates university professors from instructors in colleges or high schools.

So, with this Conflict, I came to realize that I truly did not understand what my job was as a university professor, and I have been struggling to understand what my job is for the past 13 years! In most jobs, what is done is defined by the expectations for promotion; in most universities, for better or for worse, this clearly means the professor's job is primarily doing research very well, and "putting in time" on teaching and administration duties. While that comment may seem trite, ignoring recent attempts to change such promotional expectations, it remains true that I know of very few universities in which Assistant Professors aren't continually stressed about maintaining their research productivity in order to keep their jobs, independent of how much effort they devote to teaching. In fact, I can relate two anecdotes, both from my time as an Assistant Professor (at an American university, before I repatriated to Saint Mary's!) ... The first anecdote is from a physics department colleague of mine who was a well-renowned award-winning teacher: during the time of our annual performance evaluations, the Dean called my colleague to his office, concerned with the exceptionally high teaching evaluation scores my colleague received – the commentary being (paraphrased, since this is 2nd hand): "It is clear from your teaching evaluations that you are spending too much time

on your teaching, and this is putting your research program in jeopardy; you need to put more time into your research to ensure you keep your grants." (I should say that my colleague did not appear to be neglecting research - he was a PI on one grant getting a few hundred thousand dollars per year, a co-PI on a group grant of about a million dollars per year, and supervised two graduate students and a postdoctoral fellow.) The second anecdote is from my own first-hand experience; as an Assistant Professor at Florida State University, I developed a program of taking science shows to inner city elementary schools near my university ... I was also called to the Dean's office to be told that "these school shows are wasting your talent and time; you should stick to programs that teach teachers, rather than going into schools". The clear issue at hand is "what is the job of a university professor?". As was noted by my Acadia University physics colleague, Peter Williams, in his AAU Distinguished Teacher Award speech in 2005, there is no "Professor School" (akin to a "Law School" or "Medical School") to train us into our jobs.

I think I do now understand what I am meant to do as a professor, and the discovery of this answer is inextricably linked to the topic I was asked to speak about tonight: The Importance of Good Teaching. Immediately after facing my "Conflict", I realized that I had successfully navigated academia because I had benefitted from Good Teaching. It was clear to me that it was now my responsibility to provide, to the best of my ability and resources, this same Good Teaching experience to all of the students I would teach. This was, and remains, a daunting task ... I, and presumably all of us here in this room, had very positive experiences as undergraduate students, and that is what catapulted us to our current status within the academic environment ... taking on the challenge of trying to provide this experience to all students is a big task – but one that I do believe is the professor's job – to provide Good Teaching. I won't try tonight to define Good Teaching, except to say that it is clear that Good Teaching requires effort on the part of the professor – to find ways to engage students, to provide all needed resources to students whenever/wherever they need them, to provide feedback to students frequently, and the list goes on. Because of this effort, and because there is no "Professor School", I also believe it is part of my job as a professor to share, and to

collaborate, with others in the university about what works for Good Teaching; participating in such professional development, sharing anecdotes (even research) from within our classrooms, is required to ensure we give our students the best undergraduate experience possible. Further, I believe it also part of my job as a professor to bring this Good Teaching out of the university, into local schools and communities – schools and communities close to our universities should benefit from the wealth of knowledge residing within our walls, and this benefit can only arise if we – the professors – venture out ... perhaps through more of such outreach, we can Teach the community about all that we professors do: not only the Good Teaching to their children in our classrooms, but the creative research we carry out to investigate all kinds of interesting questions. Through this kind of Good Teaching in our communities, we can engage more of our communities into the full mission of the universities.

But, of course, part of my job as a professor remains to conduct excellent research. So how have I dealt with the Conflict I introduced? I have dealt with it by defining my job as a professor through the word “balance”...the importance of Good Teaching has led me to balance my roles of classroom teacher, nuclear physics researcher, instructional development collaborator, and community teacher. It is admittedly not an easy balance to find in one job, and it is made easier if one can find good collaborators...a good “team” (that’s why I began by telling you about my team!). This balance would perhaps also be easier to achieve if the expectations for promotion as a professor laid out more clearly the level of balance required. But, after saying that, I want to conclude by saying that I feel very lucky to be at a university – in fact, within a region of like-minded universities – that have made tremendous moves toward formal recognition of just this balance I’ve been looking for, and talking about these past ten minutes. When I left Florida State University eight years ago to join the faculty at Saint Mary’s University, I did so because I knew it was a place that understood, and recognized, this balance. A place that valued Good Teaching at the same level as good research.

It has been a long journey for me, personally, from the time of my initial Conflict as an Assistant Professor struggling with understanding what my

job really was, to standing before you today. I believe that a professor’s opinion on this Conflict can be teased out when asked by a neighbour “What do you do?”. Today, I answer confidently: “I teach physics.”