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What's YOUR Perspective on Teaching



By Donna Qualters

Because of my line of work, I'm often asked, "what's good teaching?". I usually answer this question by relating an experience I had a few years ago. I went to an invited lecture by a very famous academician. I was seated between a department chair on one side and a junior faculty member on the other side. At the end of the ninety-minute talk, I thought: "Hmm that was interesting, a little theatrical but some kernels I can think about." Simultaneously on either side of me the junior faculty member exclaimed, "That was THE most inspiring talk I've ever been to!" and the department chair stated just as emphatically: "Well, that was a waste of an hour and a half!"

We had three reasonably intelligent people viewing the same lecturer and having three different reactions. Was this lecturer good? Depends on whom you talk to. Much of the assessment of teaching has to do with the match between the learner's and instructor's perspectives of the role of the teacher. This led me to some digging into teacher perspective, how do we view our role as teachers and what does that mean for our teaching.

Daniel Pratt (2000) has done a significant amount of work in this area. Below is an adaptation of his work on the five different perspectives teachers have on their role and what it means. If you're interested in more, check out his web site <http://www.teachingperspective.com> where you can take the Teaching Perspective Inventory and discover your perspective on teaching.

TRANSMISSION Perspective: This is the most common orientation in higher education. Teachers with a transmission perspective have a substantial commitment to content mastery and believe that the process of learning is additive. In order to transmit knowledge from teacher to learner, they provide clear objectives, give well-organized lectures, adjust the pace of lecturing, make efficient use of class time, answer questions, set high standards and develop objective means of assessing learning.

However, as with all perspectives, Transmission teachers have some difficulties. They can have problems working with people who do not understand the internal logic of their content. When challenged they return to this very content to defend themselves. Lastly, they often spend too much time talking because they are primarily focused on the content not the learner.

DEVELOPMENT Perspective: The primary orientation of a Developmental teacher is to develop in their students increasingly complex and sophisticated ways of reasoning and problem solving within a field. They are interested in assessing their learner needs and then finding linkages from where the learners are to where they want them to be. They subscribe to what I call the velcro theory -- when new information finds something to stick to it builds a stronger connection to learning.

Their goal is to change the way a learner thinks rather than increasing factual knowledge base. Developmental instructors do this by becoming effective questioners and by developing meaningful examples that learners can relate to their current experiences.

There are pitfalls here as well. Being a good questioner is an art form. Finding the right way to stimulate thinking and engage a learner is very difficult. Having the patience to provide

sufficient "wait time" while a learner processes a response is often frustrating because we want to jump in with the answer. Lastly it's hard to develop assignments and assessment mechanisms that are consistent with complex reasoning. Teachers with a developmental perspective tend to focus on the lower learner levels of recall and comprehension rather than reflection, analysis and reasoning.

APPRENTICESHIP Perspective: The belief here is that learning is facilitated when learners work on authentic tasks in real settings. Apprenticeship perspective teachers view themselves as coaches who not only build skills but also transform learners' identities to acculturate them into a profession. In other words, to these teachers learning is a combination of creating learners who have both discipline competence and social identity within a community of practice. Apprenticeship teachers create competency and identity using two prime techniques. One is "scaffolding" or breaking complex tasks into developmental smaller steps and then teaching from the simple to the complex. The other is honing their sense of when learners can work on their own and when they need teacher intervention. For these teachers it is very difficult to find "authentic" tasks in the classroom. They often use the case study approach or project oriented assignments to simulate as closely as possible actual practice. The added difficulty is developing situations broad enough to match individual learner capabilities with tasks that are legitimate work. Lastly, many practitioners find it difficult to put their practice into words.

The NURTURING Perspective: Nurturing teachers believe that long-term, hard, persistent efforts to achieve come from the heart, not the head. Student motivation will be increased when the fear of failure is removed, there is support from teacher and peers, and achievement is a product of effort not benevolence of the teacher. These teachers provide a climate of trust and balance caring and challenge. Their strategies include listening and responding to emotional as well as intellectual needs, and providing a great deal of encouragement and support, along with clear expectations and reasonable goals for each learner. There are minefields with this perspective. Evaluation is difficult especially when institutional expectations are different from personal beliefs of what is needed to promote success. These teachers often give too much of themselves and burn out quickly or neglect other important work. Lastly, they often find themselves constantly defending their perspective against colleague's criticism.

SOCIAL REFORM Perspective: This is the most difficult perspective to describe and the rarest category to find. Social reform teachers operate under three assumptions. First, their ideals are necessary for a better society, second, their ideals are appropriate for all, and third, the ultimate goal of teaching is to create social change. They have, however, much in common with other effective teachers with different perspectives. They are clear and organized, bring learners into diverse communities of practice, ask probing questions, and work hard to promote the dignity of their learner.

For this perspective to be judged effectively, learners must come to believe that the guiding ideals are as important to them as they are to the teacher. This is not an easy task when addressing and/or changing underlying value systems of students. What does all this mean? As Pratt points out, perspectives are neither good nor bad, they are simply philosophical orientations to knowledge, learning, and the role and responsibility of the teacher. Research has shown that most teachers hold one or two perspectives as their dominant view and marginally identify with one or two others. But what is important to remember is that each of these perspectives holds the potential for both good and poor teaching. It then becomes critical that we as teachers reflect upon what we do, why we do it, and on what assumptions we base our practice as teachers. By doing this, we will be able to revisit and readjust, if necessary, our own assumptions and pre-conceived notions about teaching and learning. By doing this we will continually improve the educational climate for our students.

Reference: Pratt, Daniel (2000), "Good teaching: One size fits all?", *An Up-date on Teaching Theory*, Jovita Ross-Gordon (ed.), San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Editor's Opening Comments



By Ray Williams

You may notice that this edition of Teaching Perspectives has been produced in house. I am interested in your feedback on this change. The decision to produce an in-house newsletter is really twofold, a) it provides for a quicker turn-around time and b) allows the reallocation of funds for instructional support for you, the faculty.

In an effort to focus our energies toward the improvement, we have chosen two topics for this edition. The first, instructional evaluation, is a long-standing interest of many of our colleagues as well as the administration. Recent discussions at the Faculty Council highlighted the need to revisit the formative purpose for which course evaluations were initiated. The debate on summative evaluations continues with some arguing that it is not a faculty issue. Others may feel that our input is essential, provided it is accessed in a meaningful way. The issue of course evaluation is compounded by the concerns being expressed by many individuals regarding the development of teaching portfolios (more on that later).

The second topic is the relationship between our role as researchers and course instructors. This focus is obviously based on our capacity to conduct research - a capacity that is impacted by numerous factors. To identify a few - Is there a philosophy at STU that supports research? Are the structures that support research efforts in place? Are faculty timetables designed to enhance research efforts?

In addition to these two topics, we have also included a timely article dealing with reference letters. Our thanks to Tony Tremblay for his thoughts.

The articles that follow are taken from a variety of sources. I trust that they enlighten, provoke and perhaps even provide some perspectives. After all isn't that what this newsletter is all about?

My Research/Teaching Connection: or am I there yet?

By Gayle MacDonald

In my short thirteen years as a university teacher, I have learned many things: most critically, I have learned the importance of the integration of research to teaching, the importance of having the social space to actually get research done (the argument for reduced course loads) but more importantly, I have learned humility. I have not read everything, cannot know everything nor can I even begin to touch the imagination of the hundreds of creative students I have taught over this time. I can, however, do two things well: I can teach students to think critically and to write constructively.

In order to do these two things, I first had to learn them myself. How I learned to do both has come as a direct result of my involvement in research. All of my failures, successes, findings, botched plans, publications and stacks of unfinished/unanalyzed data are testament to my learning; and it is this learning process, that exists as unfinished, incomplete, sometimes haphazard and occasionally brilliant insightful journey that has transformed my teaching.

I used to teach "from the book", (read = usually someone else's), fairly rigidly, which means pushing some unclear and voluminous agenda over a certain number of weeks and more often than not, despairing of students' inability to write and/or my inability to remedy. I discovered two things, that teaching does not always mean knocking oneself out in lectures and that the integration of research into the classroom makes life infinitely easier.

My experience is that structured group and individual work not only lightens my load, it makes the whole journey more pleasant, for my students and for myself, and addresses those writing issues to boot. Not only that, but integrating research into the classroom shows the student's MY humanity, foibles and life-learning path that academe presents. By talking about my biggest ethical transgression as a researcher, which happened to me as a graduate student, not only makes the issues of ethics "real", it shows students that "even we" can fail at such important issues. By sharing my dilemmas in research (should I go this route or should I go that one) I can actively engage students in the process of the research exercise.

Teaching the Honours Workshop in my department, as well as a class known as Research Strategies, I also learn from my students: what dilemmas they face in research decisions, how they make strategic plans only to have them fall apart at the end of a term. We go through the research journey together, then, critically assessing the readings in terms of what we are each engaged in, talking about what works and what doesn't and what might, and cheering each other on in the process.

Funny thing, at the end of a semester, we often feel more like colleagues than anything else. It is at that moment that I realize how much I've learned, and how much the doing of research contributes to that process. Am I there yet? I'm not quite sure, but I am sure I'm still learning along the way, and from what I can gather, so too are my students.

Some Thoughts on Being Asked to Write a Reference Letter



By Tony Tremblay

Like many, I am asked frequently to write letters of reference for students, a task I enjoy but which I sometimes find difficult because of a lack of information and direction. To remedy that, and to extend the mandate of this institution (which is to provide instruction when possible), I always provide students with a one-pager entitled "The Etiquette of Reference Letters." The page of guidelines is intended to help students think a bit differently about how to solicit the best letters, possible in support of their applications for scholarship money, jobs, residence proctorships, or graduate, professional-school entrance. I am happy to share this one-pager with colleagues, and would be happy to provide electronic copy to anyone interested in using any part or the whole of it. (This page, or a revised version, might even become Calendar copy, as a number of University Calendars now include reference letter guidelines among their academic regulations.)

The Etiquette of Reference Letters

The objective of this page is to provide guidelines and suggestions to help you, the student, think a bit differently about how to solicit the best letters possible to support your application for scholarship money, jobs, residence proctorship, or graduate, professional-school entrance. This objective is premised on the fact that you are serious about applying, that you want to make the strongest possible case for your candidacy, and that I can support you. If, for some reason, I can't enthusiastically endorse you, I will tell you up front.

To begin, you should know that the letter I write for you is informed by two things: my objective assessment of your work habits and classroom record, and my subjective appraisal of how you present yourself (with your peers, inside and outside the classroom, and, curiously enough, in asking for a reference).

To help me objectively assess your work I need as much factual information as you can provide—a transcript, resume, etc. To help me subjectively appraise your work is more tricky, requiring of you some effort. My subjective appraisal is based largely on what I perceive as your suitability for advanced studies or for scholarship consideration or for proctorship or whatever. To determine your suitability, I encourage you to provide me with a statement of your intentions (e.g., "I intend to apply to the Social Work Programme because . . ."). Not providing me with this statement or something similar handicaps you and me in a couple of ways: first, because I have no sense of how you perceive your suitability, and, second, because I have no sense of how serious you are about the process (more on that below).

By way of analogy, consider the following scenario: Two good students, both with A- averages, ask me for a letter of reference to get into Education at STU. The first comes by my office, tells me he needs a letter, then leaves. The second does exactly what the first does, except he

leaves a package of information with me: a transcript, a record of his extra curricular activities, a statement of why he wants to be a teacher, a paragraph containing his teaching philosophy, and a sheet outlining when he needs the letter, who it should be sent to, and what to do if I have any questions. All things being relatively equal (and they generally are), to whom am I going to give the better letter? The answer is obvious.

The lesson is simple: the more you can do to work in consort with your referee, the better the letter you will receive. And by "better" I mean more detailed, more personal (targetting your suitability), more specifically tied to your own agenda (what you want to accomplish in a programme), and generally more enthusiastic. By giving me facts to work with, you are helping me make your case. Good luck!!

The Art and Science of Teaching with a Little Help from my Friends

By Donna Qualters

"There are moments in the classroom when I can hardly hold the joy. When my students and I discover uncharted territory to explore...then teaching is the finest work I know. But at other moments, the classroom is so lifeless or painful or confused and I am so powerless to do anything about it-that my claim to be a teacher seems a transparent sham." Parker Palmer, 1998

I first read this quote from *The Courage to Teach* on one of the "other moments" days. I had just come back from a very difficult class and a very unsettling experience with a student, Mindy. I first got to know Mindy when as part of the first day exercise I asked students to tell me something about themselves, something that maybe even their classmates didn't know. I started by confessing that I was a bad violinist. As we went around the class I learned about students who maintained movie review web sites, were single parents raising young children, or had written unperformed plays. When I got to Mindy, she talked about being on her own since she was 16, about how she had to fight and scrape for every bit of education she acquired, and how she was going to become a college professor. Then in the next breath she cut right to the chase and asked me why should she come to class!

As the weeks progressed, Mindy would roll her eyes, sigh audibly, and whisper softly with classmates during class. On the other side, she was extremely bright and insightful and passionate about learning. If a class topic excited her passion, she had the intelligence and personality to draw the entire class into the discussion. On this fateful day she came to class late, sat with a bored expression and then loudly exited early. As she caught me off guard, I ignored her behavior but felt upset.

Reading Palmer that day was very consoling and validating. It does take courage to teach. Courage to be who we are, courage to face our limitations, courage to make our passions and feelings transparent, and courage to affect human lives. This led me to thinking more about the profession I had chosen. I began to wonder, was teaching a science or an art? Unfortunately as my medical educator colleagues use to comment, there is no protocol for good teaching that insures success as there is for strep throat. There is science: knowledge about how learning occurs and research literature on good teaching practices. There is art: previous experiences to draw on, "gut" instinct or what Schon has legitimized as reflective practice, and maybe a pinch of luck. We often think of artistic endeavors as being subjective - I don't like Picasso's cubist period, but my friend does. But are they really? In reality there are basic tenets of good practice and fundamentals that must be mastered for any art whether it's painting, film, architecture, or teaching. One must explore the science of the field before one can practice the art.

What have I learned through 15 years and a Ph.D. about faculty development in the art and science of teaching? I have worked with liberal and professional arts faculty, medical faculty, and engineering faculty in institutions ranging from community colleges to the top nationally ranked research institutions. I have consulted nationally and internationally and I have found that each of these faculties needed to explore the science of teaching together, before they

could become "artists" in their discipline. In other words, to grow and develop as a teacher we need to learn, reflect, share and talk with colleagues about the science and art of teaching.

Lee Shulman from the Carnegie Institute reminds us that teaching is the only profession in which colleagues do not talk to each other about the difficulties of their work on a regular basis. Can you imagine a physician not discussing a case with a fellow physician or a lawyer not problem solving a defense with a colleague? Of course not, so doesn't it make sense that we, as teachers, should talk to each other about teaching?

In this spirit I discovered a model called Dialogue. Dialogue is a carefully constructed and monitored process whereby individuals are brought together to talk in a non-threatening, non-judgmental structured format designed to help establish a common language, probe practice assumptions, examine the practice assumptions of colleagues, and increase knowledge about teaching practice. I have spent the last 7 years Dialoguing with colleagues in various institutions about teaching. It has been a wonderful experience. With fellow teachers I discovered much about myself as a teacher and learned much more about the science of teaching. But most importantly, they gave me the courage to continue practicing the art of teaching.

What happened to Mindy? I'd like to tell you that through conversations with my fellow teachers I helped her become the most passionate, dedicated accomplished student I ever had. I wish....but, through conversations with my colleagues, I was able to consider at a deeper level why Mindy affected me the way she did, what made working with her so difficult. By communal sharing of ideas, techniques, and innovative methods this group helped me to connect what I knew about the science of teaching with how I was practicing the art of teaching.

I've come to Northeastern to continue my dialoguing, to continue to grow a community of excellence in teaching and learning. I hope to encourage a fully engaged, sharing, learning community of teacher-scholars who are supported with resources, and innovative CEUT programming designed to enhance our student learning. Lastly, I hope to meet and talk with colleagues about both the art and science of one of the most joyful, frustrating, exhilarating, and maddening professions in the world - teaching.

Big-time Research at Small Universities



By Ray Williams

While searching for relevant articles dealing with small university research efforts, we came across this 'must read' article by Tema Frank. You can download the full version of the article at: http://www.aucc.ca/en/university_affairs/feature/2001/april/bigtime.pdf>

Dr. Frank recognizes the obstacles to developing a research culture at small universities, especially those that are perceived primarily as teaching institutions. While the article examines Brock, Mount Saint Vincent, Mount Allison and St. Francis Xavier many of the solutions are pertinent to St. Thomas University as well.

The obstacles she examines include: a) the challenge of building a research culture at a small undergraduate university, b) resistance from non-research oriented professors who feel threatened, c) the lack of graduate students to act as research assistants, d) above-average teaching loads, e) difficulty in freeing up time for research by reducing a professor's teaching load, and e) the need to apply for external grants because internal funds are rarely enough for a university to sustain a strong research program.

This last item is compounded by the difficulty that faculty experience when developing a successful proposal. Frank points out that, "in the past four years, small universities have had a much lower success rate with applications to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (24 percent) than larger ones (which averaged nearly 40 percent)." She believes that "simply getting more experience with the granting process is an important early step" and argues for a strong university research office that can provide vital assistance possible only through ongoing communication with a variety of funding organizations.

The current research picture for small universities is not good. Fifteen universities currently hold 77 percent of all federal research funding. In addition, the Canadian Association of University Business Officers state that, in Atlantic Canada, provincial contributions to university-sponsored research, measured on a per capita basis, are about one-quarter the Canadian average. Furthermore, according to the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, New Brunswick is one of the few provinces without special postsecondary research matching initiatives.

Sean Riley, president of St. Francis Xavier University, insists "the notion that you can concentrate Canadian research in a dozen [of the largest] institutions is quite short-sighted ... You have to see undergraduate institutions with strong research as a huge part of ensuring the quality of the next generation of researchers."

If these obstacles strike a familiar chord with you, I strongly recommend that you read Frank's article. The solutions she puts forth are taken from success stories at universities not much

larger than ours. I see no reason why they could not be duplicated here at St. Thomas University.

SGIDs - A vehicle for gathering student feedback

Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGIDs)

The SGID or midterm evaluation is a process designed to gather information directly from students and instructors with the goal of aligning expectations to improve teaching and learning. The process involves an initial meeting with the instructor, a classroom interview, which requires 20 to 35 minutes of class time (depending on class size), a final report and instructor follow-up with students.

Conducted at midterm, the classroom interviews involve a peer facilitator interviewing the students, in the instructor's absence, to identify course strengths and areas for change. The facilitator then summarizes this information and meets with the instructor to discuss the students' perceptions and pedagogical options for reinforcement or change. Research into the use of class interviews indicates that students appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback to the instructor before the end of the semester.

Class interviews, as one component of a comprehensive program of evaluation, can be an important and valuable supplement. They provide concrete information for faculty and TAs to use in deciding what goals they want to set to improve student learning. Because the class interview gathers information directly from students for an individual instructor, it can address the unique challenges that the instructor may be experiencing in a specific class.

As a component of departmental or program assessment

The SGID provides a synthesis of recurring themes from class interviews across different sections, which are used to identify overall strengths and areas for improvement. In some instances, peer facilitators conduct class interviews for all faculty or TAs teaching a course in a department or program and then summarize the information to indicate general strengths and areas for improvement in the course. In other cases, the interview process is used with all students in a program as a way of obtaining curriculum feedback.

* Information came from; Preparing for Peer Observation, a guidebook. Prepared by The Center for Teaching Effectiveness, University of Texas at Austin.

Biographical Notes of Contributors

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Request for Submissions

The November issue of Teaching Perspectives will focus on instructional practices. We invite you to submit articles that highlight teaching techniques that can be shared with your colleagues. If possible please forward your articles electronically to ltd@stu.ca