



TEACHING MATTERS

newsletter

UNB Saint John

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In this issue:

From Teaching to Learning.....1

Seminars: From a Student's Perspective....3

**Back to the Classroom after a Labour
Dispute.....4**

Transition from Triangle to Classroom.....6

Facing that First Class.....7

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From Teaching to Learning

John A. Johnson (Biology)

I have heard it said that you are likely to teach the way you learned unless you re-evaluate your experience and thoughtfully understand what it is you want to accomplish. For many, the learning experience would have entailed listening in class and taking notes followed up with assigned reading. This can be effective when enthusiastically applied but can also be very instructor centric. It is my belief that teaching involves more than the instructor and I will explain how I have come to my current approach to teaching by outlining my evolution from teaching professor to learning professor.

Like many new professors I felt overwhelmed when starting out 25 years ago. I faced large and small classes in a range of required to elective courses. In the absence of knowing where to start I defaulted to talking at the classes hoping something would sink in leaving students to fend for themselves. Of course it wasn't long before I realised I had fallen into what I had experienced rather than what I wish I had encountered. I began to think about how to stop flinging information at the class hoping it would stick and how to help them form ideas,

access knowledge and begin the process of understanding and reflection. In order to survive I have adopted a couple of strategies to help me move away from being strictly a teaching professor to a learning professor. I will describe what I attempted with a large class and what I was able to do with a small class.

For my large classes I realised that students were prone to what has been called "brain dumping" I wanted to get the students to do more with the information they were accumulating in the class. My concern was two-fold; (1) give them practise in writing while (2) preventing them from writing down anything and everything they quickly associated as being within the general vicinity of a correct answer. I developed my "shrinking box" quiz. There are four quizzes a term and the rules are (1) the answer to the question must fit into the provided box and (2) it must be in sentence form. Each quiz has a box that is, in quiz 1, relatively large for the question asked with each subsequent box being smaller for increasingly difficult questions. This forces the students to edit their answer, carefully consider what they think is the correct response, make a decision, commit to a re-

sponse and write it in an acceptable format. The final quiz question is very big and there may be a number of ways to answer. The student must choose, commit and then briefly explain in as few as three or four sentences. By doing this I have provided students reinforcement opportunities for information and helped them write down answers in a clear and concise manner. The difference in the quality of answer between the first and fourth quiz is amazing. This approach also lends itself to a class discussion on what I considered a good answer and provides an opportunity for students to share their strategies with the class. In my large enrolment classes, such as Introductory Microbiology, I always include an essay as a large portion of the final exam. I do this for a number of reasons. I want students to appreciate the importance of writing and writing well in science. I also want students to be in a position to express their opinions and ideas while fulfilling the requirements of the essay question at hand. This is a question they cannot purposefully study for and is designed to promote lateral thinking. In fact, each question is a scenario the students are asked to respond to. By bringing in what they have learned rather than just what I have said to them the students get a chance to show how they have been able to take in information, synthesize and formulate ideas in a coherent and concise way. The values of the "shrinking box" becomes evident in the essay when they are able to quickly and clearly address a topic without muddying the waters with unhelpful and possibly incorrect information. I usually provide a number of scenarios the students can choose from. I want them to be in a position to demonstrate what they have learned from a position of strength using their knowledge.

For small classes the approach was different. A few years ago I decided to change how I worked with upper level students in classes of 10-20. I wanted to take advantage of experiential learning where students were placed in the position of directing their own success. I

created a course with my colleague Chris Gray where, in small groups, the class was to engage in original research. We would provide the basic background information and show them the techniques needed; how much they accomplished would be in their own hands. This is risky business and is much more work for the instructor since from one day to the next none of us knew what the experimental results would reveal. The goal was to determine if certain kinds of endophytic fungi were capable of producing antibiotic compounds. Students had to collect plants, isolate the fungi, maintain the cultures and ultimately ferment the cultures and test the resulting chemicals for the capacity to kill bacteria. A very short time ago this would have qualified as an Honours project. By working in groups, sharing information, discussing the findings and reading the related literature the students took on a sense of ownership and accomplishment. It also made me read the literature they had found in order to discuss it with them, I had become the student. Most importantly it developed their ability to be critical thinkers. The end of the course saw the submission of a manuscript as though it was to be sent to the actual journal and the creation of a conference quality poster. The students thrive in this environment where they are creating knowledge and helping each other and other groups based on their experience. Following the success of this course, Chris Gray and I put on a follow-up course for those who wanted to take their experiment even further. From this initial small class, four students began their Honours and one became an MSc student the following year; they credit this course with providing insight and motivation to continue learning at the highest levels.

My teaching philosophy has changed over time. I have gone from flinging information to see if it would stick to having the students engage with the information and ultimately to create information. This has put me in the position of having started out as a teacher and ending up being a student: from teaching to learning.



Did you know that there are photos of the UNBSJ classrooms on the Information Services & Systems website? Check them out at <http://www.unb.ca/saintjohn/iss/> under Services for Faculty & Staff.

Seminars: From a Student's Perspective

Luke Robertson, STU Student Union V.P.-Education, LTD Student Representative

Article originally appeared in the Winter 2014 edition of St. Thomas University's Teaching Perspectives. It is reprinted with permission.

Small classroom sizes may afford quite a bit of flexibility for professors with regards to the typical lecture model of teaching at St. Thomas University, however the format of the seminar course is still appealing to many students seeking to get something a little different from their education here. The seminar course structure is pretty similar across Canadian universities, and as I surveyed students who had taken seminar courses at both St. Thomas and other institutions, I found that most of them were pretty happy with the format. Students are typically expected to have read the material, a challenge encountered for many lecture courses, but also to present on it. Student engagement is paramount to the success of not only the students enrolled in the course, but to whether or not the seminar course is a positive experience as a whole.

The million dollar question is how to ensure student engagement and participation, and it's not an easy one to answer. When students voiced their complaints about seminar courses, the complaints were largely targeted at their peers in the classroom. The main complaints were that there were often students who were not prepared to present on their assigned topics, or just unwilling or unable to contribute to the discussion. In order to remedy this, students suggested that professors teaching seminar courses make sure that the requirements of each student were explained clearly, as early as possible. If they were required to present on a particular subject for a class, they should be given ample time to prepare their presentation. On trying to better encourage student discussion, one student suggested that professors tally

students speaking in order to calculate their participation grade. It may seem like a fairly artificial way to spark discussion, however. Students also recommended professors have students submit questions at the beginning of class surrounding the topic that would be discussed or presented on that day, ensuring that each student had thought at least a little bit about the topic, and would be able to contribute. This system worked well according to a student at UNB, who said that the professor could simply read a question off the submitted lists during a lull in the conversation.

On the topic of discussion, one STU journalism graduate maintained that the professor should be very clear about the classroom being an arena where students could explore all sides of discussion without fear of being judged for saying something controversial. This particular student enjoyed being able to explore the "devil's advocate" side of an argument in order to further the discussion, despite some students mistaking his arguments for his true opinion on the subject. He felt that other students were reluctant to take a particular side merely because it was the unpopular opinion.

Seminar courses are a very valuable way to explore more challenging subject matter by having students take the initiative in the classroom. The professor serves to guide discussion and to keep students on track, similar to someone who is chairing a meeting. What works well in some seminars may not work as well in others, but all students I approached agreed that the professor in a seminar course needed to be a facilitator more than anything.

Upcoming Events

Workshop on Interdisciplinary Teaching, Friday, September 26, 2014 at 2 p.m. UNBSJ - contact Margaret Anne Smith or Lucy Wilson for more details.

Kaleidoscope 2014 Teaching Showcase, Thursday, December 4, 2014 from 8:30-12:30, Marshall d'Avray Hall, UNBF. Check the CETL site for more details <http://www.unb.ca/fredericton/cetl>.

Back to the Classroom after a Labour Dispute

Sandra Bell (English) and Kate Frego (Biology)

A strike is, by definition, a confrontation between two groups in which each have a lot to lose. Relationships between the groups, with other groups, and within the groups are almost always damaged, and the ramifications can be felt for years to come. Even the reaching of an “agreement” can be contentious and cause further internal conflict. In order for a return to a productive workplace, there is a need for healing. As individuals, we can choose either to actively contribute to the healing, or not.

As the end of the recent labour dispute approached, AUNBT asked us to prepare a “back to the classroom” document to help Faculty to smooth the return to work life on campus and in the classroom. We considered the range of people with whom we return to work: members of AUNBT; of CAE; staff, some of whom are members of other unions; and most importantly, students. We reviewed some of the literature on conflict resolution, we talked with our colleagues at UNB Saint John and UNB Fredericton, and we sought input from colleagues at other universities who have experienced returning to the classroom after a strike.

For this edition of Teaching Matters, we will outline two of the main directions discussed in our document: the need for Faculty to engage actively in the healing, and the need to keep the focus on the well-being of the students.

Heal Thyself, and Be Ready to Help Others

Heal

Almost every person in our academic sphere has an opinion about the labour dispute, and many may feel that they have been personally disadvantaged, even betrayed. Here are some general suggestions for returning to the academic workplace.

- Recognize your own stress levels, emotions, and their impact. As our colleagues in clinical psychology have reminded us, prolonged stress can interfere with sleep, emotions, and many other facets of our lives, and the recovery period is likely to be an emotional rollercoaster. Be kind to yourself, and also be aware of how your emotional state affects others - especially students, who are vulnerable in a relationship

of great power disparity. Let go of the need to persuade others; it is neither necessary nor appropriate in many cases. Seek help to deal with on-going stress, e.g. from member_issues@aunbt.ca, members of the Psychology department, or other counseling services.

- Expect some negativity, even hostility, and be prepared. Stop and think before responding. Never assume you know how others feel/ will react.
- Validate and empathize. Have you ever been in that person’s shoes? If so, express empathy. If not, this is a chance to learn about another perspective.
- In your responses, be professional - courteous, reasonable, reasoned - and not defensive, offensive, sarcastic, or dismissive. And use humour carefully!
- Above all, do no harm. Do not rise to the bait. Do not retaliate, or punish.
- “Make lemonade”: use all interactions as opportunities for relationship building/repair, and for teaching/ learning. This is an opportunity to model the behavior of a principled academic: i.e. we are non-violent, we use transparency and reasoned arguments, we can separate the professional from the personal, we are equitable and respectful, and we are not lazy or greedy. It is also an opportunity to be authentic: the principles that we personally espouse do not change, even when we are working with people that do not have the same principles.

Student issues

Students are caught in the middle in these disputes, and the pressure of the job action itself, followed by the rush to get back to the classroom and complete the necessary work, can result in a variety of reactions. Some students may be very upset with the disruption in their term, and blame faculty to varying degrees. It is important to be prepared, to work toward healing, and to be flexible.

- Prevent confrontations: try to defuse hostility before it erupts, e.g. set up class protocol by email before return to classes.
- In the classroom, acknowledge, but do not rehash, the labour dispute. Remember that the classroom is a setting of great power disparity. If you feel strongly about incorporating not only a discussion, but an assignment on the labour dispute into your class, make

it optional: students should not be forced to relive (and be evaluated on) an experience that may have been very stressful.

- Listen (in an appropriate setting), validate, and empathize with the students' feelings and concerns. Reach out.
- Demonstrate reasoned, equitable, and empathetic methods to resolving problems, whether related to courses or relationships.

Students and the New Course Schedule

- As quickly as possible, provide students with a revised schedule. Students will need to see revised dates for any tests / assignments / reading so that they can organize themselves.
- You may need to rethink the amount of content cov-

ered, the manner of covering it, the number of assignments and tests, the need for an exam, etc. Be flexible, and be perceived to be flexible. Remember, it is up to each one of us to develop a positive atmosphere and structure in which students believe that they are heard, and that they can succeed.

- Consider extending office hours for students to discuss strategies for dealing with changes in the course.

Most importantly, move forward. Learn from the experience, from the new relationships built with colleagues, and from our commitment to comparability, to make UNB even better at providing excellent teaching and research - a place that students and colleagues (present and future) can do their best work.

Save the date!

UNIVERSAL DESIGN IN POST-SECONDARY TEACHING: Reality or Utopia?



A Symposium for Educators
NOVEMBER 9-10, 2014
UNB Fredericton

Featured Presenters

Sam Johnston, B.A., M.Ed., Ph.D.
Research Scientist and UDL Expert, CAST Center for Applied Special Technology

Susan Wurtele, BSc., Ph.D.
Multi-Award Winning Teacher
Professor of Geography, Trent University

Colleen Thoma, B.A., Ph.D.
Author of *Universal Design for Transition*,
Chair, Department of Special Education and Disability Policy, Virginia Commonwealth University

Frederic Fovet, BSc., LLB, LLM, M.Phil., M.Ed.
Director, Office of Students with Disabilities, McGill University

Roberta Thomson, B.Sc., M.A. (Ed.Teaching)
Project Coordinator, UDL Faculty Toolkit
Instructor, McGill University and LaSalle College

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Register by September 12/14 for the Early Bird Rate of \$125.



This event is brought to you by the University of New Brunswick and the Government of New Brunswick, in collaboration with the Department of Post-Secondary Education Training and Labour, Mount Allison University, St. Thomas University, Université de Moncton, New Brunswick Community College, and the College Communautaire du Nouveau-Brunswick.



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For an engaging conversation from a variety of perspectives, join us at bailiwick 2014 on the UNB Saint John campus.

Thursday October 23, 2014

Hosted by Information Services & Systems

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For more information contact

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Transition from triangle to classroom

Barb Dowding (Biology)

The notification from the Union that we would be leaving the area located just outside the UNBSJ campus entrance, nicknamed “the triangle” by some, sent excitement through my three-week chilled bones that late January day. My union brothers and sisters and I had congregated daily at the triangle during the labour dispute, discussing a wide variety of interesting topics, and really getting to know each other. Now we would now be deserting the triangle and returning to our offices. I was elated to get back to the classroom, but more so, I was apprehensive about the reaction I would receive from the students in my two courses that had just lost three weeks of class time.

Teaching required courses is always a challenge at the best of times. The atmosphere in a classroom of students taking a required course contrasts greatly with a classroom of students taking an elective course out of pure interest. I was utterly petrified to go back to class and have to face these students. The dilemma was intensified since both of my biology courses were required.

Heading into the first class of my second year genetics course, I was moderately anxious. I had taught most of these students in the prerequisite introductory biology course and I was putting a lot of faith into the classroom bond built the previous year. To start the class, I put up an image up on the board of an elephant in a room. I told the students I would not be addressing the “negotiations” elephant (aka the labour dispute). Luckily for me, the students laughed and we went on with the business of adjusting deadlines and exam weightings, and learning about the fascinating world of genetics! Although that first class back went well, there were multiple points throughout the semester where we had to revisit deadlines and midterm dates. Facing a compressed semester, students were finding their midterm exam schedule to be overwhelming; many students were having up to four heavily weighted midterms in one week. I presented the students with two dates to write our midterm and they could choose either date, for any reason. I also had to be flexible with assignment and lab due dates. There were times when the students could get the work completed for the due date, but at other times, it was as simple as

just an extra 24 hours that could translate into a classroom full of students taking a collective sigh of relief. Frankly, I needed the extra 24 hours sometimes before all that marking was submitted! When the students realized I genuinely understood their situation and was willing to be quite flexible, their stress levels decreased, which was a positive outcome for all of us.

There is no description short of outright fear that could have accurately described how I felt facing the first year biology class of 130 new students. I admit that the weekend before classes started up again that I kept checking the Facebook page “UNBSJ Confessions/Complements” to get an idea of what the frequenters of the page were revealing about returning to the classroom. I am still not sure whether that was a good idea because there were mixed reviews. Surprisingly, when I walked into the lecture theatre, the climate felt relaxed and the students actually put me at ease. The impression I had was that the students were glad to be back and they were ready to learn. I was very impressed by the level of maturity shown by the first year class. We discussed the adjusted outline for the course, as well as the new midterm dates, and everyone seemed content with our new direction. One student asked how “quickly” we would cover all the material with less time in the semester. I reassured them we could always adjust the pace, taking it slower if required. The first year classes progressed normally until the “midterm season” and then student anxiety increased. Notably, when the date of the first midterm approached I felt the need to offer the first year class two dates to write, giving them an opportunity to choose which midterm date would be best for them. I received numerous emails from students thanking me for allowing them an option of when to write.

Looking back on the semester, I can see how events could have unfolded in a much more negative way. If I had returned to class with a distasteful attitude, the experiences I would be writing about here would be of a very different nature. The classes and interactions with my students were extremely enjoyable post-labour dispute, and for that I am extremely grateful.

Facing that first class

Kate Frego, Biology

As “rumours of peace” spread, I realized that I was nervous about my first meeting with my students after the labour disruption. Would they be resentful? Perhaps accusatory? Colleagues from other institutions had reported some post-strike confrontations with students. From my innate pessimism, I conjured classroom diatribes, damaged relationships, a permanently chilled classroom...

I’m a coward: I prefer to prevent any such situations, and to use tools that are “authentic” to my normal teaching practices. So I adapted two that I use all the time: a welcome email to set the tone, and an opportunity for safe, anonymous response. Before the start of any course, I send out an email that welcomes students to the course and expresses my own anticipation of an enjoyable and productive experience for all. This time I added my proposed rules of engagement:

Hi, everyone...As of midnight last night, I was given access to my email and files again! (YAY!) I'll be so happy to get back to classes again - I hope you will too.

First, I am delighted to see that no one has dropped the course (another YAY!).

Second, I want to reassure you that, whatever the Board of Governors decides to do about the term, I will be flexible and make it work for you and for your learning. The unofficial word is that we will work through the March “break” (which should be called “Study Week”, if you ask me!) and extend classes one week longer, making up two of the three weeks. We will all want to adjust individual learning contracts to reflect those changes (once they are confirmed) - I will be glad to discuss possible strategies with you, together or individually. The important thing is your ***learning***.

Third, I want to tell you that I can understand

that you may have strong feelings about the labour dispute and its impacts on you. I was a student during strikes at two different universities (once as an undergrad, and once during my PhD) so I actually know how disruptive and upsetting it is for students. If you want to talk about how angry/upset/frustrated/confused/etc. you are, I will be glad to listen and to offer whatever explanations or help I can without trying to change your opinions - I promise! - but I would like to propose that we not use our class time for those discussions.

I propose that we focus class time on what we originally “signed up for”: learning about plant ecology.

I propose that we limit our class-time discussions ***about strike-related issues*** to those that affect our course, such as adjusting the syllabus, contracts, etc.

I also propose that if anyone would LIKE to talk about the strike experience, give opinions, ask questions (anything), etc., we set aside a time outside class to which people can come if they choose. This could be my office, or a pub, or whatever you suggest. ;)

And finally, I promise that I will not be biased IN ANY WAY by any student’s opinions about the strike, the professors’ stance, or me in particular. Our classroom policy of openness and mutual respect stands, and if you feel that I, in any way, am not meeting that standard, I’m asking you to point it out immediately. You have my word that I will listen, respect your opinion, and ask for further input. With sincere pleasure,
KF

I felt much less nervous when I faced my students, knowing that I had acknowledged the strike as an

issue, and extended a proposal as a first step to recovering our working relationship. I began that first class by handing out blank index cards that I frequently use for anonymous or directed feedback. I asked if they please note (1) whether they accepted my proposal, and (2) any comments or questions that they had about the strike, including issues unrelated to the course, or requests for a meeting to discuss them (outside the class). A small change: I asked them ALL to hand the cards back (into an opaque receptacle), whether they had written anything or not, so that no one would stand out. I reassured them that I would respond to everything written.

I was relieved to find that there was no outward hostility from any of the students, and that the (few) responses I had on the cards were focused on issues of mitigation: how we would make up the lost time, whether assignment due dates would change. I was already preparing the answers to those questions, and we settled them in the next class. But I believe that my approach reinforced the way I run my courses: acknowledging student concerns, and providing explicit and reciprocal guidelines for behavior, opportunities for student input, and reminders that the first goal of our mutual endeavor is student learning.

**The Vice-President's Excellence
in Teaching Committee
welcomes new and returning
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year.**

