

“Making Teaching Count”

by Pat Rogers, York University

Each year, Dalhousie University hosts a “Celebration of University Teaching.” This annual event is one of the key focal points in Dalhousie’s efforts to recognize and reward teaching excellence. The full range of Dalhousie teaching award-winners, from across campuses and disciplines, are brought together on one afternoon to receive citations of recognition and to be publicly celebrated. Paired with this ceremony each year is a special presentation, usually offered by a guest speaker of national status, on a topic closely related to efforts to acknowledge and value both fine individual teaching and a general culture of instructional excellence. As part of the 2000 Celebration of University Teaching, Dalhousie hosted Dr. Pat Rogers of York University. Dr. Rogers is a 3M/STLHE Teaching Fellow, a past President of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, and the President-Elect of the International Consortium for Educational Development. The title of Dr. Rogers’ presentation was, fittingly, “Making Teaching Count.” The following article has been edited by Bruce Barton, OI&T Director of Instructional Development Services, from an audio recording transcription of Dr. Rogers’ presentation

“Congratulations”

The number of teaching award winners, and the range of disciplines represented, at the annual Dalhousie “Celebration of University Teaching” is, indeed, impressive. It is not easy to win a teaching award. Furthermore, receiving one is not without its complications. This is particularly the case if one works in a climate where teaching is not valued. Dalhousie, and all the award recipients honoured, are to be congratulated. I would also like to invite all Dalhousie faculty members to consider joining an ‘action group,’ and to reflect upon what each of us can do to change the climate for teaching throughout the entire country. For there is much to be done.

“Making Teaching Count” is the name of an initiative of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, and I would like to share with you the kinds of projects it consists of. Before I do that, however, I would like to tell you some stories about the teachers that have truly provided me with inspiration. Not surprisingly, as I am a mathematician, all the stories are about mathematicians, as well.

Tales of Good Teaching

The first who comes to mind was a mathematician who came from Canada to teach in Carter, South Wales, where I grew up. He was quite the most incredible teacher that I had ever come across. I was in awe of his cleverness; I

could not understand why his method worked, but I could see his love for the subject. There is a downside to this story, however. This wonderful teacher asked me what I wanted to do when I left university. When I said that I wanted to teach, he essentially said that I was “too good to be a teacher.” What are we saying about teaching when we denigrate it this way? We need excellent teachers at every level of education.

The second individual who comes to mind was a friend and colleague at my very first teaching position at the North London Polytechnic. What so impressed me was how

extraordinarily organized she was. Her lecture notes were brilliant, and she would easily translate them onto the blackboard. Many of us pursue that kind of order all our lives; few attain it.

The third example is not a single person, but an entire department. There



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is a four year, liberal arts college in North Eastern U.S.A. that has a reputation for producing excellent mathematicians. Twenty percent of all undergraduates at this college are in mathematics (vs. an American national average of 1%), as are 60% of all women attending the college. I went to this school to discover their secret, and what I found were amazing teachers. One stormed around the room asking questions; another refused to tell students when and if they had completed their assignments. Both were deeply respected by the students.

Reconsidering Assumptions

The lesson in these stories is that there are many different ways to be a good teacher, and that we should carefully consider our assumptions. In particular, I'd like to discuss three specific myths about teaching. The first is that teaching and research are inexplicably linked. There is a lot of opinion to support this statement. There is a mass of research that completely contradicts it. Study after study has shown that good teachers can be poor researchers, and good researchers can be poor teachers. The second myth is that teaching is all about information transmission. Teaching is so much more than this. The third myth is that good teaching is a matter of how 'naturally' skilled a professor is. And this last myth leads directly to the Canadian “Making Teaching Count” project, which began in 1996, at a national meeting of Instructional Development officers, in Vancouver. A colleague from UNB first suggested that we had to start taking teaching so seriously that we would start recognizing the ability of university teachers in a professional manner. This colleague suggested that we had to recognize that these myths were false, and that we needed to begin to accredit university teachers, much as we accredit teachers at the elementary level.

We prepare graduate students for years to be good researchers, yet we simply assume that they will be good teachers. They are dropped into classrooms without training. True, knowing the content is important, but knowing how to communicate that content to students requires so much more than this. The concept has been established for several years in the UK, where they have drawn up detailed guidelines for the accreditation of

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• university teachers and programs, and
• where the government is now adopting
• this process. A similar movement is
• being implemented in Australia. In
• Canada, however, the focus has been
• placed primarily on graduate students ,
• who are relied upon for instruction
• much more heavily than in the UK.
• Many Canadian universities have
• established teaching and learning
• programs for graduate students to
• provide them with the teaching skills
• that they need.

• **The Scholarship of Teaching**

• The other aspect of the “Making
• Teaching Count “ project is what has
• been called “The Scholarship of
• Teaching.” If we want to take teaching
• seriously, we should be formalizing it
• and sharing teaching information with
• our colleagues in a scholarly manner. If
• research makes the difference between
• high school and university, then we
• should take the same approach to
• teaching that we do with our research.
• First, we should make teaching public
• and talk about it. Second, we should
• make our teaching processes available
• and susceptible to evaluation and
• critique. We should be able to present
• evidence about our teaching and the
• results that it produces within our
• students. Anecdotal evidence is not
• good enough. Finally, we should make
• our teaching ‘community property’ by
• publishing it so that others can build
• upon our work.

• What would it mean to say that
• “teaching counts” at your institution?
• How would you support that statement?
• For instance, does Dalhousie have a
• Vice-President for Teaching and
• Learning?

• Several initiatives have emerged from
• within the “Making Teaching Count”
• project. STLHE instituted the Blizzard
• Award last year, which recognizes the

scholarship of teaching. It is awarded to groups of individuals who are doing collaborative projects in teaching with the primary aim of increasing student learning. Also, the 3M Teaching Fellows in Ontario have produced an on-line scholarly journal called *Positive Pedagogy*. This journal publishes brief articles on strategies and techniques that have worked for teachers in the classroom. The journal is edited and peer reviewed—an excellent step towards building the scholarship on teaching.

Teaching and Research

Another issue that we would like to promote is the recognition that academics have different stages in their careers, and this leads to different emphases in research and teaching. Individuals should not be penalized for wanting to research and write about their teaching. Not everyone will have the time or the energy or the interest to assess their own instruction, but such work should not be less valued. The dichotomy between research and teaching is firmly established, resulting in the devaluing of research into teaching.

I began this talk with stories about inspirational teachers because I particularly wanted to discuss the need to bring passion back into our teaching in a totally unapologetic way. This will, in fact, provide a link back to research. One of the things that made me enjoy my teaching more was when I examined my teaching method and thought about how I learned. I was beginning to bring my research into the classroom. What I mean by this is that I brought my knowledge of *how to do* research into the classroom. Once I introduced my knowledge of my research abilities, I began covering the material more slowly—and, indeed, covered less of the topic—but the students understood

more and covering more on their own initiative.

The final point I would like to make is in the realm of technology. A very influential article entitled “From Teaching to Learning,” published about five years ago, suggested that through the virtues of technology the focus would shift from ‘teaching’ to student ‘learning.’ Another article, by Tony Bates, suggested that CDRom’s have the ability to replace lecturers. I call on all of you to fight strenuously against the notion that technology will solve all our ills. I agree with the suggestion of moving from ‘teaching’ to ‘learning.’ However, the basic assumption behind these articles is that ‘teaching is lecturing,’ and that lecturing is devoid of interaction. There is a great deal of research that has shown that there is

“no significant difference” between learning that occurs without technology and that which occurs with it. I think our approach to using technology must become much more critical than it currently is. Technology is excellent for accessibility, but using technology locally for the sake of using technology is problematic.

A Call to Action

I would like to ask you and challenge you to promote teaching across this country. Things are going to change over the next few years, and we will be the ones to lead that change. I urge all Dalhousie faculty members to take the initiative and become more active in this cause.

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