

2014 AAU Award Recipients



Teaching outside the box:
Innovation and its Constraints.

IT'S NOT A MYSTERY: JUST BE THERE: 2014 AAU AWARD WINNERS PLENARY SESSION

Ann Braithwaite, University of Prince Edward Island
Martin Kutnowski, St. Thomas University
Peter MacIntyre, Cape Breton University

Introduction

The winners of the 2014 Atlantic Association of Universities teaching awards were asked to address the delegates to the teaching showcase, in a plenary session, on any topic they chose. The following text reflects their thoughts on university teaching and the importance of the relationships on which university teaching thrives. The plenary session at the teaching showcase, and the following text, is based on speeches given by the award winners at the fall meeting of Atlantic Association of Universities Council held in St. John's, NL in September, 2014.

We all work at a time when universities—or university administrations—seem increasingly captivated with the idea, and the supposed necessity, of “change.” There is always something, we are told, that will change the university, and what we faculty do in it, for the better. Sometimes that's a new technology: online courses, MOOCs, clickers. Sometimes it's a new academic focus or arrangement: increased internationalization, new strategic plans, program prioritization and other kinds of academic plans. Sometimes it's a range of new services that will attract and retain more students: more expanded student affairs, more athletics and recreation resources, etc.

Although perhaps ironic, given what we've received our awards for, we want to argue against change, or at least, against many of these kinds of changes. But let us be clear. We are certainly not against change per se—this is not a conservative plea for the status quo, for never asking questions or rethinking how we do what we do. But it is a strong claim that universities are always intrinsically about change—even without these kinds of new plans or gimmicks.

Indeed, change is central to the university—it always has been. Change is at the heart of what we do with students—and what happens to and with them; it describes what happens to us throughout our careers in this profession; it is the whole reason we pursue new knowledge and ideas. Change is built into what a university is, because universities are not buildings and policies. At their core, they are about human interactions—they always have been. The university is a place of relationships, a place where what we do is connect—in every sense of that word. And any new initiatives we want to imagine in the university or to the university must, we think, always start from this recognition. And so, for us, there is no mystery to what we do. It is, it must be, about being there (physically, mentally, emotionally), being open to and nurturing those connections and relationships, and always recognizing them as central to what we do—and that we actually can't do what we do without them.

Each of our comments below, then, focus on some aspect of this idea of relationships and connections, using our reflections about them and their importance to challenge the university to remember—and to re-center—its core mission and purpose, and to start from the important acknowledgement that change has always been here, in what we do. And it is this idea that must inform where we as an institution go.

Martin Kutnowski: It Takes a Village to Raise a Teacher

I am honoured by this award, and cherish the recognition of my peers. But, as Spiderman's Uncle Ben says, "With great power comes great responsibility," and in this space I am therefore obliged to acknowledge the sustained support I received from so many people. In the first place, I must mention St. Thomas University and most specially Dr. James Whitehead, Director of Teaching and Learning. Without his encouragement and guidance, the nomination simply would not have happened. Alongside James, I must mention Roger Moore, Brad Cross, and Doug Vipond, longtime mentors who have supported me in more ways that I could list in the reduced space I have.

Inquiring deeper into whose help I need to acknowledge, I realize that the list is actually very, very long. "It takes a village to raise a child," the old adage goes, and it takes a village to make a teacher. All my colleagues and staff at STU have helped getting me where I am, one way or another, because it's hard to trace where I learned this or that, where a thought started and developed, be it during a formal teacher training exercise, or informally. Being part of a community of practice, even an off-the-cuff comment in the elevator may turn into a revealing notion that helps one have a better teaching day.

And then, what about my colleagues at schools where I taught before, such as The Graduate Center of City University of New York or the Music Conservatory Manuel de Falla in Argentina? For sure, I also learned so much there. And what about my high school teachers, and my private teachers? Yes, of course, them, too. And what about my wife, who is also a piano teacher and with whom I've discussed the problems of teaching music about a million times? And what about my children (my most challenging students), or my brother and sisters (my most helpful classmates), or my parents (my most challenging teachers)? Yes, all of them are part of who I am and what I have been able to do in life, and so they deserve this recognition.

And then, my students: those who kindly nominated me for the Excellence Award at STU earlier this year, but also those who supported me in the past; those who wrote a kind comment during a course evaluation, or the ones who honestly and constructively pointed out problems in a course, helping me correct it; or those who were not nice, and angrily complained because they hated the class or how I taught it.

Or . . . even a wider circle than that. I must thank all the students (I guess in the thousands now) who ever chose me as their teacher. These students entrusted me with their dreams, following the

roadmap I proposed, embarking with me on the adventure, patiently putting up with my mistakes, hoping for the best, step-by-step holding my hand and giving me cues about how to get the job done.

I'll share just one example about that. More than fifteen years ago, when I was teaching part-time in New York while doing my doctorate, I ran into one of my students in the subway, just after the lecture ended. It was my first course in that school, very early in the semester. This was a course which I had not taught before and I was using a mandatory textbook that I did not know very well. Looking over my shoulder, the student saw me assigning grades in the papers that I had just collected: A, A-, A, A+, B+ . . . With a soft voice and an enigmatic smile, she casually observed that I was marking too high. During the rest of the train ride, I kept thinking about it and realized that she was right: In my inexperience with the letter-grade system, I had come close to shooting myself in the foot by setting wrong grade expectations for the class. Right then and there in the subway car, there was no question in my mind that this student had saved me from some future pain, perhaps even an uncomfortable visit to the Dean's office.

Why has this episode stuck in my memory? Remarkably, this student's only reason to help me calibrate my grades was her honest commitment to the sacred ritual of teaching and learning, even if it meant that she would get a lower grade. I'll never forget it. Students help us become better teachers.

So, my acknowledgments are not the introduction to this essay, a necessary formality before I get to the core of what I really wanted to say. No, my acknowledgements are its centrepiece: students help us become better teachers; colleagues help us become better teachers; family and friends help us become better teachers.

And if we dare to reflect about our past, we may realize that our own teachers, good or bad, alive or dead, also keep teaching us by example from the depths of our memories, forever reminding us what to do or what not to do:

- Reflecting what we liked about our favorite elementary school teacher.
- Thinking back about why we did well—or didn't do well—in a given course.
- Recalling the excitement of a collaborative assignment or the anxiety of a final exam.
- Remembering anecdotes—like the one about the student in the subway—and only then, many years later, realizing their importance. This is to say, establishing a constant dialogue among our many lives as students, as teachers, as parents.

So much energy invested by so many people over such a long period of time that it would be staggering to measure. So much learning. We can look at all of these real experiences, past and present, all of this lived knowledge, as a formidable data bank, a gigantic bag of tricks to help us in the here-and-now of the classroom. Who knows, perhaps one day, when we are very old, this accumulated knowledge could become some sort of wisdom?

What is it, then, the secret? How can we harness this data bank, understand our strengths and weaknesses, and become gradually better? Perhaps the only condition is to also assume ourselves as

learners, and lifetime learners at that; to admit that, as teachers, we have been shaped by a large number of experiences, that we owe who we are to a large number of people, and that we are constantly adding to this outstanding debt, because we are still constantly learning from everybody around us.

Perhaps all it takes to slowly become a wiser teacher is to humbly admit that, no matter how prestigious and shiny our diplomas, how many years we have been teaching, how much we may have mastered our discipline, still, the new group of students before us today represent a new challenge. These new students staring at us with big round eyes the very first day of classes bring with them a new set of minds and desires and fears, a new set of perspectives on how they see themselves and how they want to reshape the world. And, in all honesty, at that point we teachers become beginners all over again. Some days, we may have to mumble the scariest confession of all: “I don’t know.” And that’s when we get to choose how we feel about it: Shall we choose to see the glass as tiringly half empty or as excitedly half full?

The bar raised by our training and experience can also be a problem: We worked so hard for that doctorate! And yes, we have been teaching for a while and, at this point, aren’t we supposed to know what we’re doing? Indeed, now and then there are glorious days when I know exactly what I am doing in the classroom and everything goes according to plan. But, just the same, there are also tough days when I don’t know what’s going on and must work very hard to catch up. Most days are in-between. Sometimes my students surprise me; sometimes I surprise myself. What’s for sure is that I need help, I am still learning, and I hope that I always continue learning.

“It takes a village to raise a child” and it takes a village to raise a teacher. The good news is that, provided we ask for it, help in becoming gradually better at our craft will be available, from students (new and old), from colleagues, from the institutions where we teach, from our friends and families, even from strangers whom we have never met, and whose thoughts we get to read on a computer screen. I got that kind of help in the past, as soon as I started teaching, and I have been so fortunate to continue getting it, every day. With so many opportunities to learn from one another and so much room for growth, teaching really is not just an honourable profession—and hard work—but also a most exhilarating ride.

I could not have arrived at this point in my journey without the village that has generously nurtured and raised me up to the present day, and without which my work—who I am, or what I am—would have no meaning. Thank you, my beautiful village: family, teachers, colleagues, students.

Peter MacIntyre: Teaching Relationships

It was something like 17 years ago when a then Vice President (now a University President) made a comment that has stayed with me. He was discussing the need for change and transition during a difficult budget process and he said that universities have not changed much in 350 years. His message was that change is overdue. Being both a faculty member and ethnically Scottish, my first reaction was

to take a contrary position. If something lasts for 350 years, it most certainly is doing something right; there is a truly impressive legacy.

But as I thought about the dialectic between constancy and change at the university, the reasons for its longevity began to come into focus. I am old enough to remember that television was going to replace teachers in general, and professors in particular. And I am young enough to have heard that MOOCs will do the same. But neither has come to pass and I see no need to worry that either will—television has had its shot and some commentators on MOOCs are already declaring them to be “over.” I must admit to having signed up for a MOOC—I enjoyed the video lectures and I genuinely learned something. But statistically speaking, I am normal. By that I mean I stopped participating after a few weeks. I never did finish that course; likely I never will.

In contrast, thinking back on my days as a university student, I can say that barring illness, I attended every class of every course I took throughout university. So I started thinking about the difference between the two experiences and I keep coming back to the same conclusion. The difference between the television or MOOC delivery model, as compared to in-class learning, is not the information content, or the video demonstrations. It’s not the expertness of the teacher and it’s not because of the advances or limits of technology. The key difference is the way that the relationship between teacher and student develops.

Universities are places of constant change; both the research and teaching sides of the house guarantee as much. Research is inherently change-oriented. Teaching itself changes as faculty adapt to new generations of students, new course management systems, new technology for learning, advances in knowledge and new ideas. But at its core, the heart of the whole endeavour is the relationship between teacher and student. That is what has not changed in the past 350 years or more. Once you are somebody’s student, you always are that person’s student. That special relationship reflects the constancy that will keep universities at the foreground of teaching and learning at the highest levels. Human beings are born to learn, we do it voraciously until testing and grading and credentialing and tuition fees and rigid curricula get in the way. Through it all, if we can keep the relationship between teacher and student in focus such that the changes happening around that core serve the development of a teacher-student connection, then universities should be fine for another 350 years or more.

Every student is a unique individual, no matter where we as faculty meet them. If one considers the on campus and the virtual environments, faculty now interact with their students in more places than ever—in class, on the web, on Facebook, with Twitter, and with whatever else will replace these tools. The best teaching practices are the ones that serve to connect us with students, the ones that genuinely facilitate the development of a relationship between persons, and respect the unique trajectory of the learners.

This is not simply a nice thing to say, it is a course design issue. I would like to offer some practical suggestions for how to foster interpersonal connections, with a focus on the potentially difficult case of online learning. The ideas to follow are drawn from an online course in Positive Psychology. In the first week students pay tribute to someone who has passed on, a relative or even a

celebrity who has affected them. They consider the person's life and how they lived their values, describing celebrities, leaders, and ordinary people (grandparents and war veterans, fathers and mothers) with extraordinary strength. Then the students write their own legacy statement, how they want to be remembered. They also introduce themselves to the class; they are not asked to name their year and program but they are asked to describe "you at your best"—an example of something they were proud to do, something that reflects their core values and character strengths. With these three techniques, I learn a lot about them as people: I know that Talia lives her Christian faith in everyday decisions; I know that Jennifer loves her dad more than anything and that she almost lost him three years ago when he had cancer; I learned that Sandra made a quilt for a blind woman with an inscription from the bible written in Braille—a gesture that brought them both to tears at the time and the rest of us as well when we watched the recording of the tribute posted to the web.

So it is quite possible to learn a lot about students online, to develop a relationship with each one that is personal and meaningful. The rest of the course continues to ask students to identify their core values, their "signature strengths" and their sources of happiness in life. They conduct an experiment that pits fun against philanthropy and they write about it (philanthropy wins almost every time). Even as I speak to you today, this week their assignment will be to do a truly altruistic act for a friend, neighbour or even a stranger. Then they come online to describe whether true altruism can exist in the human psyche and whether or not they experienced it during the assignment. I offer them my view that the psychological term "pro-social" behaviour is an impoverished concept unsuitable to the selfless acts of everyday men and women.

So with 350 years behind us and more ahead, I hope that all of us, students, faculty, and university leaders, will see ourselves as the caretakers of a valuable legacy. As we work to support and strengthen the ways in which faculty and students can learn from each other, in unique and individual ways, we will bring out the very best in the next generation and in ourselves as well. If we can facilitate those relationships then our various roles at the university will have a lasting legacy of our own.

Ann Braithwaite: Being the Change I Want to See in the World

More than a feel-good bumper sticker (not actually said by Ghandi), and as clichéd as it can sound, "be the change you want to see in the world" captures my philosophy of educational leadership, as well as my sense of myself and my professional identity in the university. (It's also of course a poster on the door of my office.) It's the short and pithy articulation of how I think educational leadership is about both modeling a way of being, a way of living a life, and working towards making desired and needed change happen in academia. It's an articulation of how I think about my role as a professor for students, and my role as a faculty colleague for other professors around me. It's a saying that guides how I think about my position in relation to education more broadly, and to the university specifically. In short, it's a powerful shorthand for what motivates me in this profession, and for how I want to motivate others.

When I think about educational leadership, I think about both how much I love, and how important I think, good conversation is—in the teaching we do, in the ways we talk about that teaching,

and in the opportunities we create to enable that teaching. Reflecting on teaching obviously involves discussing what we do in the classroom—content, method, delivery, outcome—all the elements that make up our pedagogy and our pedagogical contemplations. Good conversation, though, also demands intellectual community: a space within which to have these conversations; other people—eager and enthusiastic—with whom to engage in this talk; an intellectual and political engagement with the world of ideas; a deep caring about the lives of those with whom we share the university, especially our students—who are the core reason we are here; and a shared commitment to ongoing self-reflection about “who we are and what we do” in this institution. None of these comes easily, amidst the day to day busyness of our academic lives, and yet, I believe passionately, they are/they must be what ultimately drives and sustains us in this profession. When I think about educational leadership, then, I think also of how important it is—to me—to devote the time and energy needed to create the possibilities for those conversations, to build the intellectual communities of which I want to be a part.

Intellectual community connotes a wide-ranging and varied set of possibilities. It is what happens (or what I want to happen) when we talk in hallways and over coffee and in each other’s offices about what we’re doing and what we could do, about student “ah-ha” moments in our classrooms, about ideas for new courses and curricular offerings; it is what happens (or what I want to happen) at conferences and symposia, on and off campus, when we put together panels and roundtables and workshops because we’re excited to work with others and excited about the process of coming together to do that work; it is what happens (or what I want to happen) when we write (often with others) and edit and review and assess our own and each other’s work and programs and curricula. In short, it is what happens when we understand ourselves as engaged in that constant and limitless conversation, and understand ourselves as part of a process of producing both knowledge and opportunities for that knowledge production together. A passion for, and commitment to, intellectual community insists on an ongoing and interactive process of producing and exchanging ideas, ideas that can make a difference in ways that we don’t and cannot know beforehand, but that must be allowed to be articulated and debated and talked about—and that must remain clear to us all as the reason why we are a university in the first place. In the midst of my passion and enthusiasm, I increasingly worry that we are losing sight of this core understanding of the university—in the growing emphasis on instrumentalizing ideas and the knowledges they can produce.

Intellectual community, though, does not happen by itself. It needs to be fostered and nurtured in a variety of ways; it takes ongoing work to get it going and keep it going. It needs recognition and valorization as a process worth doing. It needs structures that enable it to occur and continue—i.e., changed policies, different institutional focuses, an academic context dedicated to ensuring that it can exist, and the shared belief that students will thrive in it. It needs an openness and willingness to take seriously its risks (perceived and real), and to be able to work with others to meet and address those. For those of us, though, who find the process of that ongoing conversation some of the most invigorating and exciting part of this profession, the work of producing intellectual community—its spaces, conversations, structures—is as rewarding as being a part of it. Its payback, for me, comes both in finding the people with whom to engage, and in seeing how the venues one has imagined and shaped to do this succeed in captivating other people too.

While there are no doubt a number of ways to work at producing the space of and for intellectual community, my own focus is always on identifying how I can bring people together to reassess what we do, together, in this profession. What kinds of programming do we offer—and what are the many ways we can package and offer those knowledges? What kinds of curricular possibilities do our current structures and policies constrict and even inhibit—and how can we alter those to increase opportunities for our students? Who are “we”—in my own field and program here or at other universities, in the Faculty of Arts more generally, and in universities today (especially given their massive changes and challenges)—and how can we articulate that in more accessible and exciting ways? And, most importantly, how can we bring all of this back to our classrooms, to our students, to excite them too about “who we are and what we do?”

Educational leadership, then, in its most complete sense, involves constantly asking questions, identifying and even challenging status quo arrangements, and doing the work, with others, to make change that highlights and strengthens the university’s core mission—empowering students and colleagues to enhance and enable that unfettered exploration of ideas. I think I’ve succeeded best as an educational leader—both in and outside the classroom with students (my favorite part of this job), as well as with colleagues from many areas on my own and other campuses—when other people around me get as passionate and enthusiastic and even as loud as I am, when they take nothing for granted but think of their worlds as always open to possibility and change. I could not imagine my work in this profession without this intellectual community I work so hard to create—so I can both be and live as I imagine and desire, for myself and for others, in this profession. To be the change you want to see in the world can make the world one you want to be in—and that’s both an exciting motivation and a model of leadership I want to embody.

Author Biographies

Ann Braithwaite, recipient of the AAU Anne Marie MacKinnon Award for Educational Leadership, is a professor in Diversity and Social Justice Studies, University of Prince Edward Island. Her award citation can be found at:

<http://www.atlanticuniversities.ca/sites/default/files/documents/AAUTeachingAwards/AAUEducationalLeadershipCitations/Citation%20Braithwaite.pdf>

Martin Kutnowski, recipient of the AAU Distinguished Teaching Award, is a professor in the Department of Fine Arts, St. Thomas University. His award citation can be found at:

<http://www.atlanticuniversities.ca/sites/default/files/documents/AAUTeachingAwards/AAUDistinguishedTeachingCitations/Citation%20Kutnowski.pdf>

Peter MacIntyre, recipient of the AAU Distinguished Teaching Award, is a professor of psychology at Cape Breton University. His award citation can be found at:

<http://www.atlanticuniversities.ca/sites/default/files/documents/AAUTeachingAwards/AAUDistinguishedTeachingCitations/Citation%20MacIntyre.pdf>