

“First Principles: The Idea of a Dalhousie Education”

The 12th Annual Celebration of University Teaching provided an ideal venue for beginning a university-wide discussion of the ‘Idea of the University’, a series of events sponsored by the Senate Committee on Learning and Teaching (SCOLT) and supported by SCOLT’s ‘Idea of the University’ subcommittee. Three panelists with a range of research and teaching backgrounds were invited to share their thoughts on the aims and objectives of undergraduate education. The speakers provided thought-provoking discussions on Dalhousie’s mission and priorities, beginning a discussion that will continue at other events in the coming months.

Suzanne Le-May Sheffield,
Office of Instructional Development and Technology

Developing Community

David Blaikie
Faculty of Law

“All ...[people] by nature desire to know.” So said Aristotle in the opening lines of his book *Metaphysics*. How then can the university fulfill its mandate to help people to learn? That, you will agree, is a big question. I want to consider a partial answer to that question, by touching on what I believe is a fundamental characteristic of the university, the idea of community.

Socrates was a great teacher, it has been said, because he had a profound respect for students, and shared a belief that he and his students were engaged “together in a common quest for learning.” [Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 58.] You will recall Socrates’ teaching method, which involved a questioning engagement and dialogue with his students.

One scholar has noted that “the Socratic method of teaching...is...a powerful expression of community between teacher and pupil.” [Ibid., p. 59.] Now whether you choose the Socratic method of teaching is not the point, of course. Whatever style or

method of teaching a person favours, an active engagement between teacher and student is essential. And this engagement will express itself in community.

The community that Socrates loved so dearly arose out of his profound respect for his students, and a shared belief that they were engaged in a common enterprise to learn. There must be, I think, at the very core of the university, a deep respect for people – students, administrators, staff, and teachers. This respect is then allied and joined together with a commitment to a common enterprise of learning. And, as the example of Socrates discloses, the most tangible sign of that commitment to learning is an ongoing and lively dialogue, both inside and outside the classroom. However, in the modern university, particularly larger universities, there appear to be forces at work which sometimes prevent the formation of strong communities.

To create the appropriate conditions for community will no doubt involve a creative reevaluation of the university’s existing organizations and internal structures. Is the way things were done in the past, and which worked in the past, preventing the university from success in the present? For example, are students unduly restricted in their ability to

OFFICE OF INSTRUCTIONAL
DEVELOPMENT AND
TECHNOLOGY

DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY
1234 LEMARCHANT ST.
HALIFAX, NS
CANADA
B3H 3J5

TEL:
902.494.1622

FAX:
902.494.3767

WEBSITE:
WWW.DAL.CA/OIDT

EMAIL:
OIDT@DAL.CA

• cross-register into other parts of the
• university? Do we provide sufficient
• opportunities for different departments and
• faculties to collaborate in research and
• teaching? Or, do we offer courses which are
• open and of interest to all members of the
• university across disciplines and
• departments? For example, a course in
• negotiation. A course on a topic like
• negotiation could draw students and faculty
• from every part of the university – the
• Business School, the Medical and Law
• Schools, and the Faculty of Arts and Social
• Sciences.

• Now, you may agree that creating and
• maintaining a community of learners is of
• paramount importance in the life of a
• university. How we accomplish that goal
• therefore should be the focus of serious and
• ongoing discussion. There are some obvious
• steps that could be taken. For a community
• to come into existence, people must be given
• the opportunity to meet other members of
• the group in both formal and informal
• settings. If you want community to form
• among teachers in a faculty, for example,
• there have to be opportunities for these
• people to meet each other. A wonderful
• example of how to build and strengthen a
• community is found at Dalhousie Medical
• School, where, under the extraordinary
• leadership of Dr. Ron Stewart, a choir has
• been formed, composed of medical students,
• faculty, staff, and friends of the Medical
• School. This choir has put on benefit
• concerts at the Rebecca Cohn, and has
• toured together singing in hospitals and
• other venues. Participation affords choir
• members the opportunity to forge bonds
• among the group, and with alumni and
• friends throughout the Maritimes.

• Two other fine examples of community at
• Dalhousie are found at the Law School and
• King's College. When students and alumni at
• Dalhousie Law School talk about their
• experiences at Dalhousie, the first thing they
• usually mention is the enjoyment they
• experience being members of the Law School
• community. At least a couple of factors seem
• to be at work in creating a strong sense of
• community. One is the fact that a diverse
• group of students comes to Dalhousie Law
• School from across Canada. Being away from

home, they look to their new colleagues
from the Law School for friendship. Another
factor is the first-year curriculum. All the
first-year class study the same subjects.
Similar forces seem to be at work in the
Foundation Year at King's College. Just
yesterday, I was speaking to a first-year law
student who is a King's College graduate. She
spoke about the wonderful experience of
being part of a vibrant community as a
student at King's, and how happy she is to
find an equally strong community at
Dalhousie Law School.

Various implications flow from the idea of
the university as a community. I will note
but two. First, a university cannot do
everything. Choices must be made. The
language department cannot teach all the
world's languages, the law school cannot
teach all the world's laws. I think this follows
from the fact that a community is always a
particular community, made up of particular
men and women in a particular place and
time. In making choices about the
curriculum, universities must decide what is
essential and what is not essential. When
making decisions beyond the essential, they
must build on the strength of their particular
faculty and the needs of their students.

A second implication of the university as
a community is that the university is a
community of learners, not consumers of
information. Learning is not a product that
can be bought and sold. The task of the
university community "is to educate people
for the world by gradually introducing them
to the full complexity of our humanistic,
scientific, and religious interpretations. This
it should try to do by cultivating an
understanding of the various methods and
ways of knowing, along with an awareness of
their differences, limitations, and
possibilities." [*The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,
1967 ed., s.v. "Newman, John Henry," by
James Collins.] Students, faculty,
administration, and staff come to Dalhousie
University from across Canada, attracted by
our reputation as a strong and caring
university community. We have a diverse
faculty and student body. We can build on
these and other strengths to create an even
better and stronger community of learners.

What Do Our Students Really Want?

Sampalli Srinivas
Faculty of Computer Science

Learning to be an excellent teacher is a career-long undertaking, because a great teacher is never a finished product but rather always in the process of becoming.

T.E. Cronin, cited in S.A. Baiocco and J.N. DeWaters, *Successful College Teaching — Problem Solving Strategies of Distinguished Professor*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon Publishers, 1998.

The majority of undergraduate students arrive with high expectations about what their university learning experience will be like. As teachers, how can we prevent these students from feeling bored, angry, defensive, and resentful about the reality of that experience?

University educators must make themselves aware of the learning needs of their students and meet them. Students recognize a good teacher as a good “package”—one who is passionate about and dedicated to teaching, delivers the course material clearly, is enthusiastic about the subject matter, and shows care for students.

First and foremost, *good teaching comes from the heart!* We must have a deep-rooted passion within us to teach, to interact with students, and to see them nurture and nourish the knowledge that they learn.

Students want to learn from a teacher who is prepared and who delivers the course material clearly. A teacher who is prepared with a well-organized lecture; who organizes course material from the known to the unknown, the familiar to the unfamiliar, the general to the specific; and presents the whole before examining the parts will be well-received and appreciated by students. Teachers need to organize their lecture delivery to present essential information in manageable chunks, and should consider the power of repetition: tell them what you are about to tell them, tell them, tell them what you have just told them. Furthermore,

inter-weaving direct lecturing with activities that allow students to think about and/or apply the information they are receiving during the course of each class is a delivery format that results in active learning and increased student enthusiasm for the subject.

Students also want to experience teachers who are enthusiastic, cheerful, and humorous. As William Arthur Ward said, “*The average teacher tells, the good teacher explains, the superior teacher demonstrates, and the great teacher inspires!*” We need to inspire our students to learn more about our discipline but perhaps more importantly we want to inspire them to learn, and teach them how. Teachers can maintain a good attention level and increase comprehension and retention by creating a comfortable classroom atmosphere in which students feel safe and excited about learning. Teachers

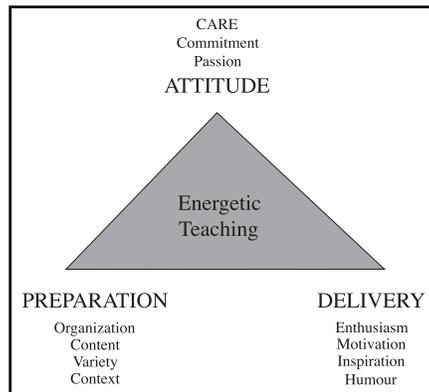
need to relieve classroom stresses and engage with their students to build a rapport of trust that can only lead to mutual learning.

Above all, teaching is about caring! We must always wear an invisible band around our forehead that reads: “*I care.*” We must care about our students as individuals by being tolerant and valuing diverse opinions, by

being flexible to students’ needs, by being available inside and outside the class for consultation and discussion, and by being willing to learn from our mistakes. Recognizing that students are individuals and treating each student accordingly will garner a teacher respect that facilitates the learning process. As Professor Serge Piccinin, University of Ottawa, says in “*Making our Teaching More Student-Centered*” (*Focus on University Teaching and Learning*, OI DT Bulletin, March/April 1997):

“Students learn what they care about, from people they care about, and who they know care about them.”

If we as teachers truly give our students the care that they richly deserve, then teaching and learning becomes a tremendously enjoyable experience.



Re-Visiting Our Liberal Arts Mission

Jim Stolzman

*Department of Sociology and
Social Anthropology*

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

I accepted a position at Dalhousie in 1970 in large measure because it was a university that genuinely cherished the ideals of a liberal arts education. I was born, raised, and studied in the United States. Like many students of the '60s generation, I had a lot of misgivings about what was happening to America in general and American universities in particular. These concerns, plus the Vietnam War and a whole series of other things, led me to relocate here. I came in search of a more humane society and, I'm happy to report, I believe I found it.

As an expression of Dalhousie's commitment to liberal arts ideals, I think the University's Statement of the Aims of Undergraduate Education is marvellous. It's been in the calendar for so many years that we tend not to take note of it anymore. I make a point to re-read it every couple of years. Somewhat to my surprise, I've yet to find a single phrase in this Statement that does not resonate with my own values and beliefs. What is more, I think it is just a magnificent piece of prose. Reading it always makes me feel proud to be a part of this institution and the very noble enterprise of educating undergraduate students.

Once that euphoria wears off, however, I say to myself, "Stolzman, those are just goals. A good university does not make it by virtue of proclaiming what it wants to do; it must also perform." Opportunities to celebrate teaching are good occasions to take stock of how we're doing with respect to our professed aims and objectives. This is how I approached my preparation for this event. Ever the sociologist, I polled the students in my second year class about how they thought we were doing in this regard. Based on their input and my own reflections, I would say that I believe we're doing a pretty good job of delivering on our promises, but there are some soft spots that I find worrisome.

Two areas of concern stand out for me. One is the first year experience at Dalhousie, and the other is the persistence of large numbers of three-year graduates in Arts (and, to a lesser extent, Science) coupled

with the relatively stable numbers of four-year graduates. The criticisms I would offer of what students do in their first year at Dal, are pretty much old hat. They're the same ones critical observers of large universities have long made—too many large classes, too little writing, too little personal contact with professors, too many multiple-choice exams, etc. I have little new to add to this critique. But I can't resist one point which I only became aware of last year. In addressing a Faculty meeting in Arts and Social Sciences, Bill Maes, the University Librarian, mentioned to us that only 24% of the university community have active library cards, that is, borrow materials from the library. The university community of course includes graduate students and faculty, so it is probably a fair estimate that somewhere in the neighbourhood of 20% of undergraduates borrow books and other materials from the library and 80% do not. Viewed from the standpoint of providing a liberal arts education, this figure is rather alarming. What does it say about our academic aims if many of our graduates leave this university without acquiring the joy of reading and love of good books? I think this statistic should give us all pause.

Now let me turn to a discussion of the three-year versus four-year (non-honours) degrees. Top third year students with 3.0 (B) averages or better are annually sent a letter encouraging them to take a fourth year at Dalhousie. We've also introduced a number of program options like double majors, and a spate of minors. I think these measures are having some positive effect. But I would argue that we also need some new ideas that go beyond re-packaging existing classes. I am especially concerned about the students with GPAs below 3.0 who, though not receiving a letter, are nonetheless being sent a message. I would argue that these students are precisely the ones who stand to gain the most from an additional year of study. It has been my observation that our weaker three-year students are frequently the ones least inclined to explore a range of subjects outside their major field of study. Instead they play it safe and load up on elective classes in their major. Unfortunately, these same students also tend to be less proficient in terms of the qualities (e.g., writing, oral communication, critical thinking) we regard as the hallmark of an educated person.

So why do so many of these students terminate their formal education after three years with us? Certainly the steady rise in

tuition fees and other costs of university education is a huge factor. But I think there are other reasons that are equally important. One disincentive is that our 4000-level course offerings were created at a time when only honours students did a fourth year. Many academic units, including my own department, have not bothered to reconfigure their curriculum or, if they have, it is still highly geared to elite students seeking greater academic specialization in their chosen field of study. What I believe we need are more upper-level classes that combine liberal arts learning with a variety of transferable skills that will

serve our undergraduates well in the world beyond the academy. With a bit of imagination we ought to be able to design classes and learning experiences which speak to both the intellectual needs and practical interests of these students.

We need to return to the Statement of Aims to ensure that we provide undergraduates with the opportunity to combine the best of a liberal arts education with their own immediate career goals. At the same time, we also need to encourage our students to acquire the skills they need not just to complete a degree but to enjoy learning for the rest of their lives.

A Statement of the Aims of Undergraduate Education At Dalhousie

Dalhousie University offers undergraduate education enriched by a longstanding institutional commitment to research and to graduate and professional education. The University tries to assist all its undergraduate students to become independent thinkers and articulate communicators, knowledgeable about their chosen disciplines or professions, conversant with a reasonable body of general knowledge, and committed to learning throughout their lives.

Dalhousie assists its students to learn how to think for themselves. Students in all disciplines and professions can expect to develop skills and attitudes crucial for logical and independent thought. The faculty strives to teach students how to think, rather than what to think, and to enable them to make fair-minded enquiries in their fields of study and into the broader ethical, cultural and social issues that shape our lives. An educated person thinks carefully, reconsiders received ideas, and leads an examined life. The development of these habits of mind is the primary goal of undergraduate study.

Dalhousie assists its students to learn to express themselves, orally and in writing with clarity, precision and style. It does so, not only because communication skills permit the efficient transfer of information, but also because they make possible dialogues which lead to new ideas and to deeper appreciation of existing knowledge. Because a communal effort to exchange ideas and information is at the heart of university life, students in all disciplines and professions need opportunities to develop their skills in writing and in speaking at all levels of the undergraduate curriculum.

Dalhousie assists its students to master a combination of specialized and general knowledge. The specialized knowledge acquired by undergraduates at Dalhousie varies from discipline to discipline and even from student to student. Such knowledge should include, not only data skills, but also an understanding of the theories, structures and processes central to the discipline or profession in question, and an awareness of their practical applications and ethical consequences. Undergraduate students at Dalhousie should become familiar with a significant body of general knowledge as well. All should become acquainted with concepts central to our own culture and those of others. All should acquire basic quantitative skills and some knowledge of the principles of science and technology. All should share a sense of history and an appreciation of achievements in literature, philosophy and the arts. Such general knowledge helps us not only to confront the practical demands of work and life, but also to comprehend more fully our experience of the human condition.

Dalhousie assists its students to develop the capacity for commitment to learning throughout their lives. Their educational experiences within and outside the classroom should be rich and diverse. By providing social, cultural, recreational and other opportunities for student involvement and leadership, Dalhousie acknowledges responsibility for promoting both personal and intellectual growth.

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Dalhousie Conference on University Teaching and Learning

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**“Promoting Academic
Integrity in a Community
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by

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Rutgers University



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OFFICE OF INSTRUCTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TECHNOLOGY
DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY
1234 LeMARCHANT STREET
HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA
CANADA
B3H 3J5