TEACHING & LEARNING AT MOUNT ALLISON UNIVERSITY
THE NEWSLETTER OF THE PURDY CRAWFORD TEACHING CENTRE

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PCTC's Undergraduate Teaching Internship Program

Mount Allison University has a long history of experiential learning and of strong partnerships where undergraduate students collaborate and often publish and present their research with faculty members. Into this already receptive environment, the university's successful Undergraduate Teaching Internship Program was launched as a pilot project in Fall 2005, it and has been a flagship program of the university for almost four academic years.

The initial funding for Internship was supplied by a $100,000 grant from the General Electric Company. That original grant has been used up, but the program has been sustained through other sources and has sufficient funding for the current term, until April 2009.

The Undergraduate Teaching Internship Program was designed to provide a rich experiential learning opportunity for senior undergraduate students, presenting opportunities for them to develop skills, knowledge and values that transcend those normally associated with undergraduate education.

Some of the outcomes for the Interns were anticipated: increased and deeper content knowledge; enhanced skills, such as communication, leadership, presentation, listening, time management; enriched values and attitudes about learning, education, and engagement. However, the success of the program has far exceeded expectations.

Interns are usually fourth-year students, although some third-year students have excelled in the role. The supervising faculty member—the mentor—selects a Teaching Intern based on that student's combined aptitude and potential. PCTC does not dictate or police the terms of the Internship, but does provide resources and help. The one commandment is that the Internship should never compromise the Interns' performance in their own classes.

Internship Facts and Figures

Interns are paid $735 for 70 hours of work (roughly 5 hours a week for 14 weeks)

Funding constraints limit the number of Interns

Each term, there are approximately 20-25 Interns (requests are received for twice that number necessitating meticulous waiting lists)

Including Winter 2009, there have been 215 Teaching Interns since the program began

The total number of students in classes with an Intern exceeded 1500 in the Fall 2008 term alone!

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Interns are generally assigned to a particular course, although a few have been assigned more broadly to programs and have served as resources to more than one course. For example, one Intern has worked in the Library to develop and deliver information literacy training sessions for students. The Intern has usually taken the course in which she is assigned to ensure familiarity and confidence with the content. Interns' duties vary with the course: for example, they teach or co-teach some classes, lead seminars or tutorials, conduct extra-help sessions, offer essay-writing or test-taking assistance, mark papers, assist in content development — all supported by the mentorship of a faculty member.

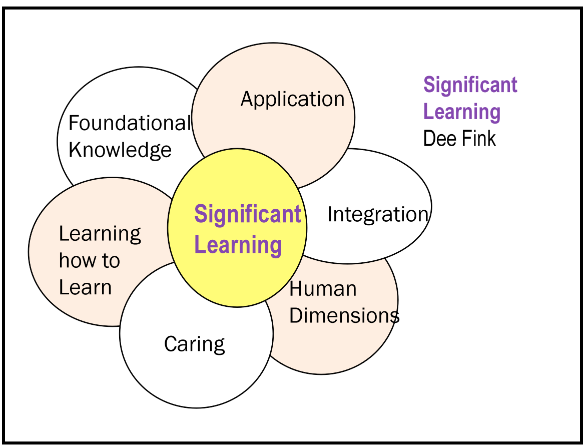
The one-on-one mentoring relationship between the Intern and supervising professor is a pivotal component of the program. One professor said that the program encouraged him to "refocus some of my own teaching goals, and methodologies"; another says it "helps faculty clarify their own thinking about courses."

[M]eeting with the intern to discuss grading philosophy, assignment design, and like matters helped to clarify and refresh my own thinking. The addition to the workload was very slight and greatly exceeded by the rewards.

Similarly, the support afforded by the mentor builds the Interns' confidence and morale. As one professor who has mentored three students notes:

This program . . . also gives [students] the opportunity to work one-on-one with a faculty mentor and build skills that are not otherwise necessarily taught in university.

Dee Fink (2003) has suggested a new taxonomy in which significant learning comprises six overlapping facets: Foundational Knowledge; Application; Integration; Human Dimensions; Caring; Learning How to Learn. When applied to Internship, Fink's taxonomy shows the significance of the Interns' learning.



Fink, L. D. 2003. *Creating significant learning experiences: An integrated approach to designing college courses.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Although each Internship is different and there is no set curriculum, the disciplinary content, the pedagogical instruction, and the reflective approach are among the ***foundational knowledge*** of the program.

The ***application*** of knowledge is fundamental to Internship. Supported by mentors and the PCTC, Interns apply their learned content knowledge and their own experience as students to teaching, developing material, and assisting other students. A two-time Intern, who had no intention of becoming a teacher, has now found his niche as a result of the program:

I am now a full-time instructor at a training centre in Halifax - I never planned on doing any teaching after Mt. A, but here I am! Everything I learned as a teaching intern has better helped me design my classes and interact with students

Interns ***integrate*** their own teaching and learning experiences and look for the intersections between their own experiences and those of the students in the classes where they are working. One Fine Arts Intern commented:

I have seen a direct and positive correlation between the knowledge gained from the internship and my progress as an artist."

Human dimension and caring are also strong components of Internship. Interns' values and

attitudes about teaching and learning are invariably altered by the program. The following comment from a mentor demonstrates how the attitude shift actually improves learning:

[T]he internship programme exposes students to considerations related to teaching and course design that they otherwise would lack. This facilitates a wider and needed discussion of this issue. The more students know about teaching, the better students they become, the higher the quality of their education.

And in metacognition, ***learning how to learn***, Internship scores high, as one mentor says:

This is a great opportunity for young adults to develop new skills and knowledge. . . . Students learn to become independent learners and take responsibility for their own learning. Coupled with this, they develop strong interpersonal skills and are able to identify and address the needs of others in and outside the classroom.

The Internship Program has had a sustained influence and its success lies beyond the easily measurable. Through Internship, senior students are role models; the students in the class can see and emulate the Intern's passion for learning. An Internship is a prized position and a badge of honour: Interns develop skills, knowledge, talents and values, through partnership with their faculty mentors and benefit from that learning when they apply for graduate school or employment. As one former Intern now enrolled in Law school, commented:

I have gained confidence in my public speaking abilities, I have had multiple opportunities to design, organize, plan and implement activities in a large class, and I have been able to experience how to think critically about different ways of presenting information through a number of different methods.

Internship focuses equally on what the Interns do in the classrooms and labs and what they learn from what they do. Therefore, two important documents distinguish the Internship: a learning contract and a learning portfolio.

The process of creating the learning contract establishes guidelines for the partnership between the faculty mentor and Intern and enables them to share their individual philosophies of teaching and joint goals and expectations. The learning contract, signed by both, contains a list of negotiated duties as well as learning objectives and possible evidence of their fulfillment. The contract underscores that the student should be involved in meaningful learning opportunities during the Internship. Sample items from learning contracts appear on page 5.

Similarly, learning portfolios encourage students to reflect on their goals, track their own progress, and document their achievements—especially in the context of experiential learning. A strategic collection of student work, representing an array of performance over time, a portfolio is a complementary balance of narrative sections and evidence. The portfolio allows the Interns to reflect upon and provide evidence of their individual successes and contributions: materials created for the course, lesson plans, assignments, feedback from the teaching mentors and from the students in the class, the learning contract and self-reflection about how well they have fulfilled their learning objectives, and so on.

Like learning contracts, portfolios are a *process* as well as a product. In creating portfolios of their work, students inquire into what they've learned and go beyond mere acquisition of knowledge. A core element of the Internship program, the portfolio helps Interns to document and reify their experiential learning and prepare themselves for a life of learning. The intentionality in the process of creating a

portfolio means that student Interns do not just *have* an experience, they actively construct a developmental narrative and derive learning from it. They find patterns and meaning in their learning and they look forward to future learning goals.

From a practical perspective, learning portfolios are a very useful, easily transported document for Interns to show at employment or graduate school interviews; each new cohort of Interns reads former participants' portfolios as an introduction to the program and its myriad possibilities. But beyond these, inarguably substantive, reasons for creating learning portfolios is another, perhaps more personal one. All learning, but especially experiential learning, is nuanced—often fugitive and faltering. Portfolios can capture and document small gains and great success; they can show development, and help students see and celebrate their own growth. As an Intern in English Literature, planning to pursue a degree in Education, wrote:

As I work towards a career in Education, the learning portfolio will be valuable to me as a representation of the skills I have developed and the experience I have gained through the Internship program. I was able to tailor it to show my personality, my strengths, and my growth through samples of my work as well as through important feedback from both students and my mentor. In an interview setting, the portfolio allows me to present my abilities in a professional, visual way while also serving as a personal account and reminder of my unique experience.

Professors have seen Internship as an opportunity to add tutorials to courses, introduce a service learning project, or add new content or a new instructional technique. Mentors have described how having an Intern has enriched their teaching and the students' learning experiences. One professor "had been planning to incorporate some Excel modeling lab work in the classes for the last two years" and was finally able to do so because of the Internship. Another was able to collaborate with her Intern as a co-researcher to develop new course material:

[T]he material developed by the Intern now serves as a solid theoretical base from which I can continuously update each year and incorporate current research and developments in the area.

In short, Internship has resulted in changes to course delivery, content, and teaching strategies:

- *I was able to take an important first step towards a complete overhaul of the evaluation approach I use for team presentations.*
- *It was a great experience, opening doors for me that I was not expecting. It was nice to bounce teaching ideas off a bright person who was also invested in the course.*
- *The Internship program has enhanced my teaching beyond what I dreamed – having a collegial "insider" to the workings of a course gave me a real sense of what my students wanted, and I was then able to deliver exactly what the students needed.*

When Mount Allison University embarked on its Undergraduate Teaching Internship Program, many positive outcomes were anticipated. That they have been exceeded is an unpredicted bonus.

Though the immediate future of Internship remains uncertain until new funding is secured, over the past four years, the productive, mutually beneficial collaborations between Interns and their supervising professors have encouraged teaching innovation and fostered an even more pervasive dialogue about teaching at Mount Allison. As one mentor has said:

This program enriches the life of professors, interns and students. It brings further vigour and enthusiasm to the classroom, and thus helps make Mount Allison the great undergraduate university it is.

Sample Objectives from Several Interns' Learning Contracts

To participate in the development of a new course by identifying as well as analyzing appropriate texts

To design an interactive project, discouraging simple memorization and regurgitation

To be an effective troubleshooter

To learn about the process of assignment design (This student developed an assignment for the class that became the centre 'spread" in Argosy)

To improve my leadership and public speaking abilities

To learn how to develop and apply a rubric and how to constructively evaluate and critique written work

To learn how to engage students in active discussion

To learn about the process of guiding student learning and writing process through regular consultation

To establish and conduct regular help sessions for students requiring additional explanation of the material

To contribute to the formation of exam questions

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Coming Conferences

Fostering Student Engagement
13th Dalhousie Conference on University Teaching and Learning
April 29-30, 2009
Keynote Presenter: Dr. George Kuh
Developer of the NSSE Survey
http://learningandteaching.dal.ca/
(Preceded by a one-day symposium on NSSE at Saint Mary's, April 28)

Bridging the Development Gap Through Innovative e-Learning Environments
2009 eLearn Conference
June 8-11, 2009
University of the West Indies
Proposal Deadline: February 10, 2009
http://elearn2009.com/

Between the Tides
29th STLHE Conference
June 17-20, 2009
UNB Fredericton
Proposal Deadline: **January 30, 2009**
www.unb.ca/stlhe

26th Annual Faculty Development Summer Institute
August 3-7, 2009
University of Prince Edward Island
www.upei.ca/lifelonglearning/FDSInstitute

At PCTC in January and February

Mid-Term Feedback from Students and Colleagues:
Thursday, January 29th

The Teaching Portfolio: A Three-Part Series
Fridays: January 30th, February 6th and 13th

Creating Learning Outcomes Statements
Thursday, February 5th

Collective Intelligence: Students Working in Groups
Wednesday, February 11th

Responding to Student Evaluations of Your Teaching

Whether you used a paper form or SEEQ online, there's a strong likelihood that you have already looked at the student evaluations from last term's classes. Though so much emphasis is placed on end-of-term student evaluation of teaching (SET), teaching can be evaluated in many ways (by students, by peers, by self-reflection), at many times (mid-course or end of course), and for several purposes: *summative*—to select new faculty, or to make personnel decisions such as tenure and promotion; *formative*—to gather information to enhance the quality of teaching. No matter the purpose or time, *no single* source of data or any *single* course evaluation provides sufficient information on which to base decisions.

Personnel decisions dramatically affect both the individual professor's career and the overall quality of the education the institution provides; therefore, for summative evaluation, it is vital to use many sources of information to assess all components of effective teaching. Student evaluations <u>alone</u> should never be used to make personnel decisions. The professor should contextualize them with reflective explanations, complement them with peers' assessments, and situate them within a teaching portfolio that also provides documentary evidence, such as course outlines, sample assignments, and a teaching philosophy statement.

Similarly, if teaching improvement is the goal, formative evaluation, SET data alone is still not enough; instructors should discuss results with colleagues or teaching centre staff, contextualize results in terms of their own goals, compare end-of-term results to mid-term evaluations. The literature shows that instructors are less likely to use evaluation data to modify their teaching without this kind of consultation and reflection.

A word about definitions, here. Many institutions assign the tag "summative" to the scaled questions and "formative" to the open-ended questions which occur on most evaluation instruments. This is inaccurate. The terms summative and formative refer to the end-use of the data, not whether the questions require a numerical or a written response.

Though the literature agrees that students are reliable judges of teaching, there are a number of components of effective teaching that only peers are fully qualified to evaluate, including the following identified by Pallett (2006):

* The appropriateness of an instructor's objectives
* The instructor's knowledge of the subject matter
* The degree to which instructional processes or materials are current, balanced, and relevant to objectives
* The quality and appropriateness of assessment methods
* The appropriateness of grading standards
* The instructor's support for department teaching efforts such as curriculum development
* The instructor's contribution to a department climate that values teaching, e.g., mentoring new faculty

> The Teaching Centre at Princeton University cautions that rather than judgments of teaching performance, student evaluations are more meaningful when seen as "reflecting the spectrum of ways that students as novices learn and think within our disciplines."

The best way to use SET data is to gather it over a number of terms, looking at response patterns from a number of courses over time (at least 5 courses, some sources say, even more if the class size is small). In interpreting numerical results, don't treat a small difference as significant; decimal places are seductive but not precise. There is little meaningful difference between a 4.65 and a 4.7; yet a professor who routinely receives 4.65 for overall satisfaction can be genuinely pleased with that sustained pattern.

It is not surprising that even the very best teachers receive negative comments from

students once in a while. In fact, there would be no challenge, no reason to try new things, experiment, or engage with our teaching if we pleased everyone! Yet teachers can become obsessed with the negative comments and rather than seeing them as a springboard to getting even better evaluations next time—an opportunity to be in control—they become discouraged.

The same scholar who gamely edits and resubmits articles to journals again and again, becomes distraught when 5 out of 50 students rate him as “unsatisfactory.” Ninety percent of the students in class think he is good, even excellent, and he is upset by the five others . . . .

Admittedly, in most cases, the students’ written comments, rather than the numerical responses, incite such a visceral reaction. Regardless, it is essential that you put negative feedback into context. For example, how many of the comments relate to your teaching and things you can alter (for example, volume of speaking) and how many are course-related things over which you have little influence (the classroom, the class time)?

Do patterns emerge when you read what students listed as strengths and weaknesses of the course? Are the comments consistent or variable? Recurring comments may help you identify a potential change; comments that range from very positive to very negative may say more about students' expectations of the course, their backgrounds, or their intellectual development or preferred learning styles. How many comments are just plain rude—more a reflection of the students’ incivility than your teaching practice? These can reflect pressures and dissatisfaction with a broad range of issues that go far beyond your teaching.

Contextualize negative comments in your teaching portfolio, especially if you are a candidate for tenure and promotion or for a new job, and explain any circumstances that might have affected your evaluations. For example, research shows that faculty who try something new often receive lower evaluations at first. It is also important to differentiate student *satisfaction*, which some might consider superficial, from real student *learning outcomes*.

Teaching evaluations at Mount Allison are confidential, but it may be very useful for you to discuss your results with a colleague or with the Teaching Centre. Such discussions help you to put your feelings into perspective, identify practical things you can do to respond to the feedback, or reassure you that you are not the only professor who has ever received negative comments. (Just for the record, YOU’RE NOT!)

Going Forward

By all means, read and heed your students’ evaluations from last term, but don’t let them paralyze or dispirit you. Put them into context; tell yourself that this term you’ll do a mid-term evaluation of your teaching (contact PCTC for some sample forms); that way, you can identify issues early enough to make productive changes.

Consider inviting a colleague into your class to give you another perspective on your teaching. You can ask someone from your department informally or contact the PCTC about its Peer Consultation program. (See page 8 for details.)

References

Gravestock, P. & Gregor-Greenleaf, E. (2008) *Student Course Evaluations: Research Models & Trends.* Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

Pallett, W. (2006*). Uses and Abuses of Student Ratings.* In P. Seldin & Associates. *Evaluating Faculty Performance.* Boston, MA: Anker.

Rhem. J. *The High Risks of Improving Teaching*. National Teaching and Learning Forum. 15(6).

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Peer Consultation:
A Voluntary, Personal Approach to Enhanced Teaching

Peers can provide information about our teaching which students cannot. PCTC's Peer Consultation program is formative, voluntary and confidential**.**

Teachers may request a consultation for many reasons, including
- to obtain feedback on changes you have made
- to discover what's going well
- to improve your overall teaching skills or address a particular concern
- to discuss ideas and innovations

After you call the PCTC, the peer consultant will
- meet you to discuss your request, look at the course outline, and discover your priorities
- attend one or more of your classes
- observe your teaching and gather information
- give students a brief questionnaire at the end of class (or arrange student focus groups)
- meet you again to discuss the information that has been gathered
- send you a confidential report on the consultation

The report is **your** property, and it remains confidential unless **you** decide otherwise; you may, for example, include it in your teaching portfolio.

To find out more . . .

Come to the Feedback workshop on January 29th at 4 pm ***(see page 5)***
Or contact Eileen at PCTC
Phone: 364-2652 (eherteis@mta.ca)

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$10,000 Bonus for Good Teaching Evaluations?

In a very controversial move, the Chancellor of Texas A&M University is offering faculty the opportunity to vie for a $10,000 salary bonus, based on student evaluations of their teaching. Designed by a conservative think-tank, and endorsed by Republican Governor Rick Perry, the bonus is meant to give teachers "incentive to strive toward excellence."

Even though the evaluations used will be distinct from those used for promotion and tenure, and participation in the bonus scheme is voluntary, many faculty at the university are outraged by the Chancellor's allusion to "customer satisfaction." Citing the maintenance of high standards, tough grading, and challenging content, these professors argue that student happiness is often subordinate to student learning. They are also concerned that unscrupulous teachers will inflate grades in order to raise their scores and win the $10,000.

Even the scholar who wrote the study on which Texas A&M's bonus is based disagrees with the university's approach. Lawrence Aleamoni says that while students can judge a professor's classroom performance, any substantive teaching evaluation must involve "peer analysis" of such things as course design, currency of materials, and appropriateness of standards.

The final word goes to Dr. Cary Nelson, President of the American Association for University Professors, who dismisses the A&M bonus as a public relations ploy rather than an attempt to increase and reward long-term teaching effectiveness. This is paying professors "by applause meter," he claims:

"This corrupts peer evaluation, diminishes the faculty role, and encourages grade inflation. You give them A's, and you get 10 grand."

For the complete article, visit ***Inside Higher Education*** online at
http://insidehighered.com/news/2009/01/13/bonuspay

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