



# What is “good teaching”?

A MESSAGE FROM THE ASSOCIATE DEAN, STUDENT ACADEMIC SERVICES

By Dr. Catherine Bolton

The heart of what we do in the Faculty of Arts and Science is to teach: we teach undergraduate and graduate students, we teach part-time and full-time students, we teach students just out of CEGEP and students returning to the classroom after many years away from formal education. Regardless of what we teach, whether it is biology, anthropology or history, as professors we have the opportunity to change the way someone may look at the world, at themselves and at each other. The challenge that this presents to us as professors is to engage our students in our own passions and to help them achieve their own academic success. This is an even greater challenge when one realizes that as academics, we rarely have received formal training in the art and skill of teaching. Elementary and secondary school teachers have degrees in education, but most professors “learn on the job.” We tend to model our teaching styles on our own professors and our own personal experiences when we were students ourselves. If we have had good, and sometimes even great, professors, they inspire us to attain their heights of excellence. If we have had experiences that were not as good, then we determine not to replicate that negative experience for our own students. As we try to determine what makes a good professor, we look to our predecessors and our contemporaries for help, advice and suggestions. As new professors come on board they bring with them fresh ideas and perspectives on university teaching. In this issue, we ask eight of our professors to let you in on their thoughts as they reflect on what good teaching means to them, on their teaching philosophy and on their experiences in the Faculty.

From my own perspective, as Associate Dean of Student Academic Services, the student experience is critical. I am committed to ensuring that the Faculty provides a vigorous and effective academic experience for students which will ultimately extend far beyond the walls of this institution. My experience, learned from years sitting in countless classrooms as a student and then more classrooms as a professor, is that teaching is essentially about communication, and

that this is a skill that we have to practice and practice again. This may sound relatively simple, but it is not. Conversations between two people can be confusing; transplant this “conversation” into a classroom of even 35 students and the misunderstandings can be staggering. Yet it is only by communicating our ideas, theories and hypotheses to our students that we can attempt to challenge them to extend their personal boundaries of knowledge and experience. Regardless of the field in which we teach, as professors we are here to shape critical, thinking citizens for our communities. To do this requires us to enable students to become good learners, to be able to integrate new ideas, discard others and yes, even be threatened by some ideas which may shake their foundations of certainty. Teaching, on an essential level, is communicating the unknown. How each of us decides to do this is as distinctive as who we are. While some favour the traditional lecture-style approach, others the give-and-take of discussions and seminars, or a performance-based style, the essential element of communication overrides all methodologies. Since communication is itself the proverbial two-way street, it is impossible to truly communicate without also listening to your audience. So part of good teaching is also good hearing and good responding and that means the ability to understand the actual words of the question at the same time as you understand the dilemma of the questioner. So a good teacher needs to be able to understand what prompted the need to ask the question, to know how the material can cause that initial question mark in the mind. Then a good teacher has to be able to respond to both the dilemma and the question, to clarify the problem even before attempting an answer. And more often than not, the answer itself prompts more questions, and so the conversation continues...



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# TEACHING EX



IN 2006, THE FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCE INTRODUCED THE DEAN'S AWARDS FOR OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT BY FACULTY AND STAFF. SINCE THAT TIME, SOME 10 PROFESSORS FROM THE SOCIAL SCIENCES, SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES SECTORS HAVE BEEN RECOGNIZED AND HONOURED FOR TEACHING EXCELLENCE. THESE AWARD WINNERS HAVE SEVERAL THINGS IN COMMON – THEY HAVE A PASSION FOR

TEACHING, THEY ARE COMMITTED TO THEIR STUDENTS, THEY ARE DEDICATED TO STRIVING FOR EXCELLENCE IN THEIR CHOSEN PROFESSIONS AND THEY HAVE ALL MADE TEACHING AN EVERYDAY PART OF THEIR LIVES, TAKING IT FAR BEYOND THE CLASSROOM. IN THESE PAGES, EIGHT OF THE PAST AWARD WINNERS SHARE THEIR PHILOSOPHY FOR TEACHING AND THEIR EXPERIENCES AT CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY.

## TEACHING AT CONCORDIA: OPENING DOORS

By Walcir Cardoso, Department of Education



“A teacher is one who makes himself progressively unnecessary” (Thomas Carruthers), one who attempts to create a vibrant learning atmosphere that promotes tolerance and learner’s autonomy, one who provides opportunities for ongoing learning, beyond the walls of the classroom. These have been my goals since I embarked on a teaching

career in the late 1980s. Over the last 20 years, my experience teaching a wide range of courses, to a wide variety of students, and in disparate environments led me to develop a set of principles that encapsulate my approach to teaching: (1) The goals of teaching are to inspire and to empower, (2) Practice is the best of all instructors, and (3) People learn differently. Metaphorically, I view teaching as the opening of doors (to inspire and to empower), where the teacher’s

main purpose is to keep the doors open and enthusiastically prepare and encourage students to discover what is on the other side (practice), in their own way and at their own pace (people learn differently). What better place to exercise these principles and teaching philosophy than Concordia University?

Concordia has been actively engaged in the enhancement of higher education via the establishment of a teaching centre (the Centre for Teaching and Learning Services) that provides a variety of services to faculty and teaching assistants; the adoption of top-notch and pedagogically sound technologies (e.g., Moodle – a virtual learning environment, clickers); the availability of well-equipped and up-to-date classrooms; and teaching awards to recognize and encourage superior performance among our colleagues. Concordia’s strong commitment to excellence in teaching and the implementation of the three principles and teaching philosophy outlined above had pivotal roles in my success as a teacher and in making me realize that I might have made a difference to some students by opening doors to the Real World and thus becoming “progressively unnecessary.”

# KCELLENCE



## THE ADVANTAGES OF DIVERSITY

By Philippe Caignon, Department of Études françaises



The characteristic that struck me the most when I started teaching at Concordia University was the heterogeneity of the student body. Having taught in the past at Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, McGill University and Université de Montréal, I had never had to stand in front of a class made up of students coming from so

many horizons. As a translator, terminologist and professor of these two disciplines, I found this to be really exciting.

Translators and terminologists come from all walks of life, but they share a common trait: they are curious about linguistic and cultural diversity. They constantly study the cultures and languages with which they work. It is here that Concordia's devotion to accessibility and academic excellence becomes exceedingly relevant. Since students are immersed in such a valuable cultural and linguistic diversity, their academic training is enriched with real life experience acquired inside and outside the classroom. In dealing with other students and professors with very disparate backgrounds, they practice what they learn in class. To them, cultural adaptation and linguistic transfer are a daily fact of life. They are not theoretical subjects. So, as the semesters go by, our students become more resourceful, more flexible, and much more qualified, which are three important qualities to have in hand when entering the professional work force or applying for graduate studies.

As a professor, my personal philosophy has always been to consider my students as colleagues in training, be they future translators, terminologists or professors. Teaching

does not stop at the end of each class; it continues in the corridors, in my office and even on the street. Students are eager to learn and to practice what they have learned. And I am proud to say that Concordia offers them a unique environment fit for contemporary, cosmopolitan and modern students who expect a lot from a 21st-century university.

## TEACHING AND LEARNING

By Ian M. Ferguson, Department of Biology



How do you teach well? A fair question, but one that I believe should be asked second. My first question would be: How do you learn well? If any one idea could stand as the basis for my teaching philosophy, it is that a teacher must be able to at least think like a student. The carefully planned curriculum, the lovingly crafted lectures, the scrupulous assignments, they all make

sense to the author (how could they not?). However, the purpose of the course is not to give the teacher a review of the material.

So, what are the differences between a teacher reviewing material and a student learning it? There are at least three that I would like to emphasize in this context. First, and perhaps most obviously, the teacher has already seen it while the student is seeing it for the first time. It is easy to simply acknowledge this and move on without another thought, but take a moment to remember what it is like to learn something new. Just hearing an important concept stated is not enough, you need time to absorb it, understand it, accept that it is true, and relate it to things that you already know. Good teachers are not afraid to repeat themselves, they give students time to learn,



and provide connections with previous material.

The second difference between a teacher reviewing and a student learning is that the teacher already understands why the material is important but the student may not. I am not referring here to one course being a prerequisite for another, rather it is the broader context into which the course fits that I am bringing up. Such broader context provides a reason to learn, makes the topic interesting, helps the student to focus, makes the material easier to learn, and whets the appetite for future topics.

The third difference is that the teacher is (typically) a professional communicator (by definition), and the student is (typically) not. Students are often reticent to ask questions, and when they do the question is often unfocused. I regularly see students who understand so little of a topic that they cannot even figure out what question they need to ask. Good teachers do not merely solicit and answer questions, they think about what is implied by the question.

How do you teach well? I cannot claim to know the whole answer, but one part of the answer is that it is important to spend some time thinking like a student. Of course, one also has to spend some time thinking like a teacher. Good teaching does not mean giving students what they want, it means giving students what they need in order to learn. Understanding learning allows us to identify what they need.

## SHARING A PASSION

By Linda Kay, Department of Journalism



I didn't become a teacher by design. I was given an opportunity to share my professional expertise as a veteran journalist by teaching a class at Concordia part-time. I had no idea how to reach students and infuse them with my love for writing and reporting, but I was fortunate. The teacher that I replaced offered to advise me. She invited me to her apartment and sat me at

the kitchen table to explain in detail how the course worked. She broke it down for me. She demystified the process. She made it

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comprehensible. I've often wondered how I could have entered a classroom without her tutoring. Her generous act shaped my overall teaching philosophy: Make learning accessible.

With my students, I attempt to make learning accessible in a concrete way. I use a performance-based approach in the classroom. A journalist must be an excellent researcher, probing interviewer, scrupulously accurate reporter and fluid writer. By exposing students to real-world situations, plunging them into the world around them, I take them away from the safe cocoon behind a computer in order to show them that journalists serve a crucial role as the eyes and ears

of the public in a democratic society.

When I started teaching, like most newcomers, I questioned my effectiveness. Sometimes I still do. As any teacher quickly realizes, transmitting knowledge is a challenging process. With the help of Concordia's Centre for Teaching and Learning Services, I was able to experiment with different methods. Over the years, I moved away from a lecture-centred class structure to a far more interactive give-and-take between the students and myself. The success I've seen has furthered my quest to make learning accessible.

My experience at Concordia has enabled me to share one of my greatest passions – journalism – with future writers and broadcasters. And conveying a passion for a subject, no matter what it may be, is the gift we give our students. In turn, we grow as individuals and it becomes a two-way street – which is what education is all about.

## TEACHING MATHEMATICS

By Fred E. Szabo, Department of Mathematics and Statistics



Good teaching is quite simple: it is the process of enabling students to become good learners. When it comes to the learning of mathematics, formidable obstacles often need to be overcome before students are aware of the fact that they can understand math, do math, and enjoy math. So what is the



magic formula for learning mathematics?

We all know that numbers count: your grade point average measures your scholastic achievement, your bank balance measures your solvency, your blood pressure measures your state of health, and so on. We use these and many other numbers on a daily basis. We also enjoy playing with numbers for amusement: almost every newspaper contains a daily numerical challenge couched in the form of a Sudoku puzzle. But numbers are only a small part of mathematics. For example, some years ago, a quite different puzzle, the Rubik's cube, fascinated hordes of amateur mathematicians to a similar extent.

In a way, Sudoku puzzles and the Rubik's cube are mathematical metaphors. Good teaching involves the ability to find the right metaphors: some students think geometrically, some think algebraically, and although most of us think logically, it is often an unstructured, haphazard kind of logic. Instinctively tapping into the power of these thought processes is part of good teaching. It is part of a good teacher's desire to communicate, to persuade and to motivate.

Good teaching of mathematics adds a new dimension: overcoming technical obstacles that stand in the way of understanding and using mathematics in the age of computer technology. Computers can be used to remove the frustration of spending hours manipulating seemingly arcane mathematical expressions that often bewilder and discourage the learner.

Mathematical computer systems make it easier to manipulate and understand such expressions and free up time to explore, visualize and experiment. They free up time to gain insight into mathematical ideas and processes. Over the years, I have perfected my ability to use technology to enable my students to learn, appreciate and enjoy mathematics.

Good learning is about seeing connections. Good teaching is about making this happen. Different teachers are good teachers for different reasons. What is common to them all, however, is their desire to motivate, to explain, and enable their students to tap into their capacity for learning, for learning things they often consider beyond their talents. Successful teaching lends credence to the belief that talent is overrated. What you have learned to do with the talent you have is what counts.

**GOOD TEACHERS DO NOT MERELY SOLICIT AND ANSWER QUESTIONS, THEY THINK ABOUT WHAT IS IMPLIED BY THE QUESTION.**

## EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

By Shannon McSheffrey, Department of History



Most students who walk into an introductory history class think they know what to expect – they will learn the already well-known story of the past and probably memorize some dates. Many are surprised, then, when they find that this world of certainty, where we feel sure we know what happened in history, is shaken up: academic historians do not deal in

certainties but in interpretation, complexity, and sometimes conjecture. If no one is quite sure what caused the Wall Street collapse of the fall of '08 – although there are lots of competing theories – ever so much more so are the events and processes of the past, especially the distant past, a matter for debate and interpretation rather than a stable set of well-known "facts." The evidence we have of the past resembles scattered puzzle pieces that historians first try to find (in archives, libraries, archaeological sites, people's memories), and then try to assemble together into a coherent picture that makes sense and that uses all the pieces. Often, however, there are several possible pictures that can plausibly emerge from the particular set of pieces we have at hand, and of course new pieces are discovered

all the time – hence the debate and interpretation. The challenge for the historian of the recent past is the huge number of pieces, the overwhelming quantity of evidence, and thus the test of which pieces to choose in building the picture (because no one can complete a 10-million-piece puzzle). The historian of the

more distant past – such as in my own field of medieval history – often has the opposite problem: the pieces are scattered and often not contiguous, and the historian's job is to make intelligent and well-informed conjectures (based on the shape, colour and size of existing pieces) about what comes between. While some students find this lack of certainty disturbing, what I try to instil in my students is the sense of excitement and challenge that academic history presents. If it's all much more complicated than they thought when they came into the classroom, it's also much more interesting.



## PROVOQUER LA CURIOSITÉ INTELLECTUELLE

Svetla Kaménova, Département d'Études françaises



L'expérience que j'ai acquise en enseignement du français est vaste et diversifiée et prend son origine en 1988. Ma philosophie de l'enseignement s'est donc construite progressivement au fil des ans.

L'un de mes principes de base est de provoquer la curiosité intellectuelle chez les étudiants en les menant à réfléchir et à

trouver la réponse par eux-mêmes. Ce processus de découverte offre des occasions qui favorisent l'estime de soi, la compréhension et le respect d'autrui, l'ouverture d'esprit, voire la responsabilité civique. Je suis persuadée qu'en plus d'enseigner la discipline concrète, le professeur se doit de former des esprits libres et réfléchis, des citoyens responsables capables d'exercer leur aptitude de jugement personnel. Ce disant, l'Université étant un lieu de connaissances, a la tâche de former des professionnels qui, par leurs compétences spécialisées, apporteront une contribution efficace au fonctionnement scientifique, économique, social et culturel de notre société en perpétuelle évolution. Mais l'Université est aussi un carrefour d'échanges et un lieu de communication. Ainsi détient-elle la haute responsabilité d'habituer les étudiants à réfléchir de façon personnelle et critique, tout en éveillant chez eux un esprit d'ouverture et de partage.

Peu importe la matière enseignée, mes cours suivent en général trois temps. Il y a d'abord la synthèse des connaissances et compétences acquises dans le cours précédent.

Une deuxième étape est consacrée à l'exercice de vulgarisation scientifique car, à la base de toute compétence, il y a la connaissance constamment mise à jour par la recherche.

Une troisième étape est celle de l'application des connaissances dans la pratique. Mon rôle est alors d'accompagner les étudiants dans leurs premières démarches en les aidant à établir les liens entre les connaissances et la pratique afin que cette dernière devienne de plus en plus réfléchie et autonome.

Je ne pourrais terminer sans ajouter combien la disponibilité du professeur à l'égard de ses étudiants est primordiale pour

leur progression continue. J'ai la ferme conviction que lorsque le professeur accorde l'attention nécessaire à ses étudiants, ils apprécient sa disponibilité et lui en sont profondément reconnaissants.

## TEACHING OUR FUTURE TEACHERS

By Sara Weinberg, Department of Education



One of the joys of teaching is to instill a love of learning for its own sake. As a "teacher of future teachers," it is very important for me present this "gift of independence" to my students with passion and enthusiasm.

Life-long learning and the ability to adapt to change are developed when students are encouraged to problem-solve,

analyze, reflect and become decision-makers.

As a supporter of a "blend" of the Constructivist and Direct Instruction (which can be constructivist) models of education, I believe that students should be actively involved in the learning/teaching process. Students link new and previously learned information, thereby constructing and reconstructing knowledge through the exploration of ideas, the examination and analysis of research, discussion, and collaborative as well as individual assignments and projects. Questions are raised, hypotheses are tested and thus, understanding and skills are enhanced and developed.

This approach is not new. John Dewey in 1902 argued that students should be active participants in their own learning.

As our students move on, and the graduates of our Early Childhood and Elementary Education Program become teachers in their own classes, I am confident that they will have acquired and embraced, through their foundations, methods, practical and seminar courses, the skills and strategies required to promote independent learning. I am confident that they will provide an environment that supports and encourages curiosity, creativity, self-confidence and the desire to learn. I am confident that they will continue to espouse Concordia's values and to strive for excellence in teaching.

# Snapshot

**Dr. Adam S. Radomsky**, Department of Psychology, will be awarded the 2009 CPA Award for Distinguished Contributions to Public or Community Service. Dr. Radomsky will be presented with the award at the Welcoming Ceremony of the Canadian Psychological Association Convention to be held on June 11, 2009.

**Thomas Cummins-Russell**, an MSc student in the Department of Geography, Planning and Environment, was awarded a Maxwell Studentship in Human Geography by the Royal Canadian Geographical Society to examine the attributes of the independent music industry that are unique to Montreal. Mr. Cummins-Russell is being supervised by Dr. Norma Rantisi.

Congratulations to **Liliane Chamas** for having been elected as one of two Rhodes Scholars from Quebec for 2009. Ms. Chamas is completing an honours degree in cell and molecular biology in the Department of Biology and is a member of the Science College. Rhodes Scholarships provide all expenses for two or three years of study at the prestigious University of Oxford in England, valued at approximately \$50,000 per year.

**Kevin Naimi**, undergraduate student with Loyola International College, was awarded the Millennium Scholarship in the category of Excellence Awards Laureates from the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation. Mr. Naimi received the award for his community and academic achievements.

**Dr. Matthias Fritsch**, Department of Philosophy, presented "The Concept of Normativity in Semantic Inferentialism and Deconstruction" at the meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (SPEP), which was held in Pittsburgh in October. SPEP is the largest English-speaking society devoted to European philosophy. In a single-paper session with commentator, this peer-reviewed talk sought to show some commonalities in the understanding of responsibility in the two traditions mentioned in the title, often taken to be irreconcilable.

Congratulations to **Dr. Alexandre Champagne**, Department of Physics, whose article "Charge imbalance and bilayer two-dimensional electron systems at  $\nu_\tau = 1$ ," published in *Physical Review B* (November 2008), was mentioned in "Spotlighting Exceptional Research" in *Physics*. Dr. Champagne has also been invited to present a lecture on this research at the March 2009 meeting of the American Physical Society (APS), which will be held in Pittsburgh, PA, and also at the "Emergence Phenomena in Quantum Hall Systems" conference, which will be held in Luca, Italy, in June 2009.

**Dr. David Waddington**, Assistant Professor with the Department of Education, was awarded the Canadian Society for the Study of Education New Scholar Fellowship for his paper "The Art of Scientific Self-Defence: Transforming Dewey's Idea of Technological Transparency." The paper explains how the ideas of John Dewey, a pioneering educational thinker, could be fruitfully updated in order to provide a new, more skeptical way of looking at science and technology. It then argues that this critical perspective could prove useful in developing new approaches to science and technology education.

**The Sociology and Anthropology Graduate Students Association** and the **Sociology and Anthropology Undergraduate Union** held the first of a two-part roundtable series on Global Futures titled "Obama's America: Roundtable Discussion on Change in Global Politics," on November 21. Dr. Satoshi Ikeda, Canada Research Chair in Political Sociology of Global Futures, spoke about the context of modern American politics and in the larger framework of global politics at the session.

**Paul Grosman**, undergraduate student with the Department of Geography, Planning and Environment, won first prize (\$1,000) in the undergraduate category at the student paper competition of the Canadian Transportation Research Forum for his paper based on his BSc Environmental Science Honours thesis. The paper was entitled "Exploring ways of reducing moose-vehicle collisions through the use of an agent-based modeling computer simulation." The thesis was co-supervised by Drs. Jochen Jaeger and Pascale Biron.



# Snapshots

Congratulations to **Colin Martin**, graduate student with the Department of English, whose paper "A National Literature" won the Concordia University Department of English Wynne Francis Award for Graduate Study in Canadian Poetry for 2008. His paper "Bodies and Weather: The Pastoral and the Feminine in Lisa Robertson's *The Weather*," was published in the last issue of *Open Letter*, edited by Rob McLennan and Frank Davey.

Congratulations to **Sabrina Tucci, Jean Daou** and **Rolanda Taylor**, MA students in the Department of Theological Studies, who have all been awarded scholarships. Ms. Tucci is the recipient of the first annual Lonergan Centre for Ethical Reflection Scholarship. This scholarship will be awarded yearly to a graduate student doing research on the thought of Bernard Lonergan. Mr. Daou was awarded the P. Andre Gervais Scholarship in Theological Studies and Ms. Taylor received the Jackie Robinson Post-Graduate Scholarship.

Students from the Department of Geography, Planning and Environment won both the best undergraduate and best graduate student presentation awards at a regional meeting of the Association of American Geographers (NESTVAL) in Plymouth, New Hampshire (October 31 - November 1). **Rob Carver**, a BSc Environmental Science Honours student, won the undergraduate award for his presentation "Evaluating sediment transport around fish habitat enhancement structures in the Nicolet River (Québec)," and **Yannick Rousseau**, a first-year MSc student in Geography, Urban and Environmental Studies, won the graduate award for his presentation on "Geomorphological impacts of channel straightening in an agricultural watershed, Southwestern Quebec." Both are supervised by Dr. Pascale Biron.

Congratulations to **Dr. Peter Stoett**, Department of Political Science, whose book *Environmental Challenges and Opportunities: Local-Global Perspectives on Canadian Issues*, co-edited by Christopher Gore, assistant professor of political science at Ryerson University, was published in September (Toronto: Emond Montgomery, 2008).

**Dr. Susan Hahn**, Department of Philosophy, hosted the prestigious international conference "Von Kant bis Hegel" for the first time at Concordia University, October 11 - 12, 2008. The conference, part of an ongoing series organized by Dr. Hahn, attracts the top-ranking scholars working in the historical period. One of its aims is to hold a continuing series of seminar-style conferences to provide a living forum to foster discussion of the highest quality about texts and themes in the period from Kant to Hegel.

Congratulations to **Amanda Rizk**, master's student in the Department of Exercise Science, who was awarded the J.A. DeSève Scholarship from Hôpital du Sacré-Coeur de Montréal. This scholarship will enable Amanda to continue her work on "Affective and Physiological Response to Different Exercise-Training Protocols in Patients with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)."

Congratulations to **Dr. Raye Kass**, Associate Professor with the Department of Applied Human Sciences, whose book *Leading and Managing Dynamic Groups*, co-authored with Hedley Dimock, was published in October 2008 (Captus Press Inc.).



*Connections* is published three times a year by Concordia University's Faculty of Arts and Science. Its mandate is to provide current information on the many activities of the Faculty. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Faculty or the University.

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