

# Centre for Teaching and Learning

## The Story of the Empty Chair, or Learning from Teaching

Opening speech by Alan Ableson at the Teaching Awards Reception on December 4, 2012



I would like to bring your attention to the chair beside me. [For those who follow American politics, let me quickly assure you that this is not that empty chair, and I am no Clint Eastwood. ] We will return to the chair in due time.

Raise your hands: how many people have been teaching 1-3 years? 3-10 years? 10-20? 20-30? Any 30 or more out there? All right, let me just talk to the aged experts in the crowd. (For the youngsters out there, just look forward a few years into your own future. )

Think back to when you first started teaching, and think of the first course you taught a few times. Remember the year first year you taught that class. You hopefully inherited a lot of other instructors' material, or used questions from the publisher, which helped to make it manageable, but it was still a lot of work. You made it through, but you were probably pretty glad when it was over....

In your second year, you had seen where some of the bumps were, so you tweaked your timing, massaged your syllabus a little. In your third

year, you hit your stride in the course: it was now yours, you had strategies, you had fun remarks you could throw in, and stories from previous classes to share. You really started to think about what you were doing, and how you might change to things in the future, to really get at what you wanted the students to learn, to experience. Yes, by the third year teaching that course, things were going very well.

Now imagine ... that you're fired. Yes: your teaching career is over. Maybe you are transferred to a non-teaching position, or you go back into industry, whatever. The key is that you never teach in a classroom again.

Now imagine the entire university, imagine Queen's, working that way. Where are my 1-3 year teaching experience people again? You are now the only people left in the faculty. Good luck!

So that's a pretty scary scenario, and it doesn't seem very realistic: surely no sane institution would run like that? Does this really happen?

Yes it does, and it happens in one of the oldest elite undergraduate institutions in the United States: the West Point Military Academy (or "RMC South", as I

understand they like to be called). It is a publicly funded university that includes military training as part of an undergraduate education. Students exchange a future commitment to the military for full room and board during their time at West Point. Is it a quality institution? Well, its alumni include Pershing, Patton, Eisenhower, McChrystal and Petraeus, and for the last seven years, West Point has contributed at least one Rhodes Scholar, out of the 32 from across the entire United States. This is an institution with good students and a high quality program.

[Fun historical aside. Back in 1823, guess what first-year cadets studies all morning for 6 days a week? Mathematics. (That's the easy one: I'm from math after all...) What about all afternoon for 6 days a week? .... French! I'll leave it to the history buffs to figure out why...]

Back to our story! Now, whatever your reservations you might have about military organizations in general, or the US military in particular, no one can dispute that they see their personnel as one of their most important resources. On-going training is a massive undertaking, and that goes double for West Point, where they are building the foundational training of their future officer corps.

Yet there seems to be a contradiction here: if the training of their future leaders is so important, why would the organization trust the bulk of the teaching at West Point to instructors who are only there for 3 years? The answer is that the instructors are largely service members too, and they are posted on 3 year rotations. Typically after obtaining a Master's or Ph.D. degree, service men and women are selected as instructors at West Point, and then at the end of 3 years they move on to a new position elsewhere in the military.

To put this in our context again, imagine you received your Ph.D., were hired to teach a first year class the next Fall. In this system, you would leave the university before any of your students graduated.

Alright, so that's seems like a crazy way to run a school, but if it works for them, then fine. Where is the connection to how we teach and learn here at Queen's? We're not a military institution, with the Deans as generals and faculty as captains (despite how well that might simplify the jobs of the Deans at times...)

The connection I see is that the few continuing faculty at West Point have to, have to, have to take faculty training, teacher training incredibly seriously. They need new faculty to be as close to their best on Day 1 of Year 1 as they can get. No comments like "ah, your USATS will go up next year, don't worry", no. They have to think about and implement teacher training on a scale that makes any Queen's effort pale in comparison. So how do they bring a novice instructor up to an expert in the short time frame they have? Well, some of the obvious ways:

- intense pre-class training in the summer, essentially the CTLs SGS 901 but more.
  - o Little plug for the CTL: almost every thing I've learned about good teaching has been facilitated by the CTL, and I hope that any Provosts and budget model people are listening!
- Ongoing planning meetings throughout the term, etc.

The one you might not expect brings us back to the chair, this empty chair.

Teaching students is an art. You can talk about art, but that is never the experience of art. You can describe what you do in class, but that isn't what happened there. You can tell a colleague about that activity you tried out, but that's not them seeing and hearing the students working through it. How do you convey the reality of teaching as it is, not as it is described? At West Point, their answer is the empty chair. Every

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classroom has one empty chair, right beside the door. That chair is there for any instructor to sit in whenever they like, for however long they like. Junior or senior faculty, the invitation to sit in is always there; you can talk about the class afterwards, or just take those moments and bring them into your teaching in your own way.

Think back to to the ‘who’ and the ‘when’ when you have learned about great teaching. What was in common in the most powerful of those experiences? For most of us, it was ‘being there’, being part of that in-the-classroom shared experience that sticks with us, that informs and guides what we do ourselves. That raw shared experience can also be what makes us brave enough to try new things. Imagine having the opportunity to learn from some of the best teachers across campus; to have an open

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invitation to see and experience what they do, at both their best and at their most experimental. That’s the opportunity of that empty chair.

I have personally reaped the benefits of learning from my colleagues this way. In the math department, Leo Jonker and Peter Taylor have always been generous in letting me join their classes to see how they do the great things they

do. Seeing James Fraser’s class in physics gave me the courage to plunge into an inverted class of my own. Who do I still need to see? Anne Godeleska in Geography, Jill Atkinson and Ingrid Johnsrude and the PSYC 100 team,

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some of the great distance instructors who are trying innovating activities every year, most of you in this room...

We have a fantastic teaching team here at Queen’s, and that if we can make room for that empty chair, our best teachers can continue to teach not only for the benefit of their own students, but for us and our colleagues and all of our future students.

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