

Centre for Teaching and Learning

Teaching Reflections: Artichokes

Opening speech by Anne Godlewska at the Teaching Awards Reception, January 16, 2012



Denise Stockley asked me to speak to you briefly about why teaching matters both in general and to me. The second part of the question is easy. It matters to me because I have learned so much from my teachers. When I recall the very best of my teachers I realize that what they gave me was a life-long love of learning which, in turn, gave me access to so much of what is joyful and fulfilling in life. It is this love of learning that I strive to pass on to my students. The very best of my teachers was my grandmother. Sitting on her lap I learned how to read, which opened a universe of human relations stretching out in time and space that still leaves me breathless. There too I learned a second language that taught me that how you say (or write) acts on the world. This is not a simple world of objects and actors: we are symbol readers and our symbols transform everything. There too from a woman who had increasingly restricted capacity to move, I learned a passion for history, geography, anthropology, archaeology and appreciated that if I could school my mind, no aspect of life could ever be boring and there were no limits to my imagination. It was from my grandmother that, at the age of three, I learned how to eat artichokes and discovered the world of food as a surprising delight. But what she really did is to give me a powerful metaphor: you may open a whole world to students if you teach with love. It is all about artichokes. Finally, I would like to say that I learned patience from her as she read me *Curious George*, and

The *Cat in the Hat*, again and again and again, books I later learned she loathed. But as my family and friends would tell you, while she modeled patience, I did not learn it from her – or anyone else - unfortunately.

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In fact, that really sums up what matters in teaching for me. The most important thing in teaching is empowering students to learn for

themselves. To that end my lectures are designed to stimulate thought about particular issues rather than to suggest any certainty about their meaning or consequences. Guiding students to a rich literature, showing them how to access it and to use it critically is also very important. But perhaps most importantly I try to be clear that my expectation is not that they parrot what I have said but that they take the elements of what I and others have said and make something of their own from it. It is that capacity to make something themselves, and the knowledge that they can do so, that will serve them in life.

With diminishing resources and greater pressures on our time, choosing meaningful assignments has become more challenging, and perhaps for that reason more interesting to me. My grandmother's determination that I learn another language taught me that whatever assignments I give my students, I must be prepared to really engage with their work and to show them that

what they say or write matters and the way they say or write it matters too. I want them to be able to position themselves as powerful actors in this world, if they so choose.

The third most important thing that I strive for is that they discover the power of their imaginations and realize that excitement and curiosity are precious bulwarks against the drab, the tedious and the deeply trying aspects of life. I do this by valuing my own imagination in designing my courses, their content, their delivery and their assessment and by reacting to their imaginations (however they are expressed) with all the enthusiasm I can muster.

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The fourth most important aspect of teaching for me is remembering that it is all about artichokes.

Teaching with the student's learning as a focus is a form of love. Students experience it that way and I believe that learning in a context of gentle concern and deep consideration for the learner creates an environment that enhances learning, not just at the time but later in life too.

The fifth important aspect of teaching (learned from my inability to learn patience) is to realize that you can teach and model all you like, but students will take what they are ready and able to take from you and nothing else. So very important in teaching is the humility to respect other peoples' values, learning trajectories, capacities, talents and priorities.

These are all ideals and while it would be fair to say that my inspiration in teaching is mostly idealistic, I think realism is essential. We all teach within contexts from the disciplinary to the larger social. It is a combination of idealism - wanting to teach students according to those five ideals - and needing to face the realities of growing class sizes that led me to experiment with new technologies, new forms of interaction with students and new types of assessment in Geography 101 for the past 2 years. What are your ideals? And what are the realities you face in teaching?

With respect to the first portion of the question, teaching matters in a general sense because we are a cultured species; we share our knowledge and understanding widely and pass it on from generation to generation through our teaching. And that fact goes a long way to explaining our power and resilience as a species despite the inadequacy of our eyesight, our weak sense of smell, the absence of fur and claws, teeth that wear out in our 30s, and of course backs that leave us bedridden from time to time. This overwhelming impulse to share is clearly expressed in the internet and social media but also in our libraries, in novels and universities, colleges and schools. Of course, this sharing takes many forms – arguably we teach each other all the time and certainly don't need any degrees to do so – so the really interesting question is does teaching matter in the university?

Although we may all feel underfunded and underappreciated these days, universities are deeply influential institutions. Their greatest influence is not through the impact of the President or Provost in Ottawa or Toronto, nor through the rare idea or invention that finds its way to application or commercialization, (though those forms of influence are important) but through the influence we have on undergraduate and graduate students, and each other. Well of course, this is well known. It is so well known that we rarely talk about it or even think about it anymore. And that is a shame. Because as influential as we are, were we to think very carefully about what we are doing with teaching, together, in that amazing sharing way we as humans are capable of, we could do what we do, as individuals, in our classes, with our students much more effectively. There is evidence in this room of extraordinary teaching talent. But apart from our Curriculum Committees and our Boards of Studies, particularly in Arts and Science, arguably the very core of the university, we don't do much collective thinking about what we teach, why and how. That is something I think we should change. I think we should take the inspiring things we know about teaching and share them with each other to enhance education at Queen's for all our students. I encourage you to share your extraordinary teaching ideals and skills widely in the coming years.