

Teaching to Learn, Learning to Teach

Jude Nixon

Associate Professor of English &
Director of Honors College.

The Teaching & Learning Committee invited Professor Nixon, one of two recipients of the 2002

Teaching Excellence Award, to reflect on his teaching.

In "A Kinder, Less Ambitious Professorate," an article appearing in the 8 November 2002 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Robin Williams reports on a recent UCLA survey on the changing nature of teaching in the profession. The article features the Kelly Writing House at the University of Pennsylvania designed to bring faculty and students together to share their work, and "to encourage more interaction outside the classroom between faculty members and students." The survey finds growing attention to undergraduate academic well-being even at the expense of professors' own academic standings in their field. Increasingly, professors are putting the academic needs of student ahead of their own professional ambitions, a shift influenced, it would appear, by faculty becoming less transient and by the significant influx of female professors for whom academic nurturing of students and becoming a good colleague are more important than professional notoriety. "Instead of making yourself visible on the job market, it's more about creating an institutional portfolio that will impress your colleagues at your institution." This new direction speaks well, I think, for Oakland's not-so-new endeavors to celebrate and reward teaching. And that while the major universities so-called are only now discovering or returning to the benefits of teaching, we at Oakland have never departed from them, however much the quality of teaching at Oakland is under threat in light of current fiscal challenges and growth of the university.

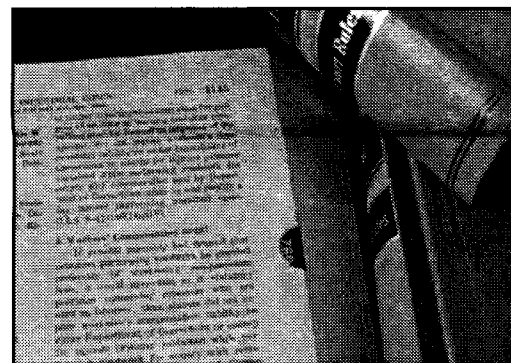
As the recent recipient of the university's Teaching Excellence Award, I have been asked to reflect on teaching. The best way I know how is to reflect on the way I teach and on the kinds of successful teaching I have witnessed. The primary goal of teaching is to promote student learning. But considering how little students actually retain from their classes, teaching should be directed not only to the transmission of useful information for immediate use (utility), but as well

(John Stuart Mill). Students should be encouraged to assume responsibility for their education, to recognize that while formal studies might

occupy a mere four years, education continues for a lifetime.

I believe that classes should be structured somewhat informally, decentered, in order to make the learning environment more conducive to meaningful conversation. Some of this could occur in small group settings, where students converse with each other and share findings. Active class participation must be encouraged, impressing on students the idea that "truth" is more achievable when multiple and diverse (not singular and homogeneous) views are entertained. Students should be taught that "truth" is not something unitary, private, or privileged, but discovered only in the collaborative pursuit of it. "Truth," in other words, is a collectivity and derived from consensus. The goal of teaching, then, is to create a community of learners/scholars. Much class time ought to be structured around conversation and responsible interaction. In-class and out-of-class assignments must be creative, must promote collaboration, and must encourage students to be actively involved in learning. A related goal of teaching is helping students to recognize the importance of empathy. "The only thing we owe the artist," the English novelist George Eliot believes, is "the extension of our sympathies." My particular discipline, literature (as well as many other disciplines), invites us into experiences otherwise unavailable to us, helping to educate our perceptions and deepen our level of empathy. Being human is about being empathetic, cultivating our imaginative perception.

Perhaps more than anything else, we should try to cultivate curious students, students who are led to see that answers are not always (perhaps seldom) readily available. The test of effective reading, I am convinced, is not so much deriving answers as it is framing meaningful questions. Students need to develop the tools and skills that will enhance meaningful conversation about the discipline under examination. There ought, indeed, to be a balance between the dissemination of information and the development of the skills necessary to derive that information. Students, I am convinced, should be shown how scholars handle text and discourse, and should be introduced, at least, to the interpretive strategies scholars employ in their field. This pedagogical principle can be corroborated by how unusu-



—INSIDE—

**Chemistry-Background
enhancer for students at risk:
A Progress Report
Page 2**

**Teaching & Learning
Workshop
Page 4**

to developing a clearly identified set of skills and tools necessary for learning within and beyond the classroom. The goal is to develop independent thinkers, not "mere parroters of what they have learnt, incapable of using their minds except in the furrows traced for them"

Development and testing of a chemistry-background enhancer for students at risk in BIO 111: A Progress Report

John Cowlshaw

Associate Professor/Chair of
Biological Sciences

*The Teaching &
Learning Committee
invited Professor*

Cowlshaw, the recipient

of a Teaching & Learning Grant in 2002, to report on his project

There is a 42% failure rate in BIO 111 (i.e., D's, E's and W's). A significant cause is the poor chemistry background that many students bring to the course. A small grant from the Teaching and Learning Committee was obtained to design, administer, and determine the impact of small-group supplemental-instruction in chemical knowledge necessary for success in biology.

Two Chem Enhancer programs have been held – the first in Spring, 2002 (led by graduate student, Mychal Thom), and the second in Fall, 2002 (led by John Cowlshaw and graduate student, Terri Tillen). Funds remain to conclude the project in Winter, '03.

Here was the process. A diagnostic quiz of 12 questions was administered on the first day of class. The 55 students who scored 50% or less on the quiz were invited to participate in the program (3 to 5 sessions during the first 1/4th of the course).

The invitation said in part, "The Department of Biological Sciences has been given funds this semester to develop a pilot project to assist BIO 111 students with weak chemistry backgrounds.

The results of the chemistry quiz taken during the first session indicate that you are someone who might profit from such a project. We invite your participation."

Ten students accepted (five each semester) and attended at least some of the ensuing Chem Enhancer sessions. (Average attendance was 76%.) The 45 students who did not respond to our invitation served as our control group. The participant group and the control group did not differ appreciably in their diagnostic quiz scores (5.0 for attenders, 4.5 for non-attenders, out of 12), although one cannot control for a likely difference in motivation.

Those who attended were instructed in a very interactive manner in basic atomic and molecular chemistry.

To measure the effect we have looked at two indices, the mean course grade and the failure rate. (I've combined Spring final grades and Fall mid-term grades.) The mean course grade of attenders has been 2.61 versus a mean course grade of non-attenders of 1.68. The failure rate of attenders has been just 1 out of 10; the failure rate of non-attenders has been 30 out of 45. These results are very encouraging in support of the thesis that such early interactive supplemental instruction can enhance success in BIO 111.

CALL FOR NOMINATIONS 2003 TEACHING EXCELLENCE AWARDS

The Senate Teaching and Learning Committee is pleased to announce a call for nominations for the 2003 Teaching Excellence Awards. Two awards will be made for 2003: one to a tenured or tenure-track member of the faculty; another to a nontenuretrack faculty at Oakland University. Each award includes a cash stipend of \$2500 and will be presented at the 8th Annual Faculty Recognition Luncheon, tentatively scheduled for April 17, 2003.

Nominations may be made by any member of the Oakland University community, including students, faculty, alumni, administrators, and staff. Faculty may not self-nominate for the Award. The letter of nomination should address the nominee's accomplishments based on the following criteria:

- *Superior Teaching*
- *Innovative Instructional Practice*
- *High Educational Standards*
- *Productive Learning Environment*
- *Demonstrated Ability to Inspire and Motivate Students*

Student nominations are a highly valued component of this process. Faculty are encouraged to announce this nomination process in all classes.

The Committee will contact the nominees and chairs of their departments to request additional information. Previous Teaching Excellence Award winners and current members of the Teaching and Learning Committee are not eligible for nomination. A plaque with the names of previous Teaching Excellence Award winners is on display in the lobby of Kresge Library.

Nominations will be accepted through January 15, 2003. Letters of nomination should be sent to:

Teaching and Learning Committee
Attention: Professor Ravi Khattree
Department of Mathematics and Statistics
Oakland University
Rochester, MI 48309-4485

TEACH, continued

ally stimulating a class becomes when a colleague is invited in to participate or in a collaborative teaching experience. Students see modeled the sophisticated give and take that occur in the interaction with ideas. The best way to teach, I believe, is to model for students the subtleties of learning and the process by which we, as scholars, observe, frame hypotheses, and arrive at conclusions, sometimes tentative and contingent. I try to show students that literature, for example, requires a strategy of reading that makes certain requirements of them: curiosity, discipline, industry, objectivity, imagination/empathy, and passion. The same strategies of inquiry apply to the examination of all texts from which, regardless of the field, one has to be able to observe, derive evidence, make judgments, form inferences, and frame hypotheses. In my discipline, I continue to search for ways to make increasingly real this kind of vital learning environment for my students. I attempt to still in them a passion for literature and life, and to encourage them to explore how the study of literature can cause them to reflect on their community and especially on the ways communal life might be imagined and shaped. I have said little to this point about the sheer pleasure of literature. I want merely to remark that a major part of reading literature is for its own sake—aesthetic pleasure—to appreciate the beautiful and the not-so beautiful.

A major aspect of my teaching emphasizes interdisciplinarity. I try to show students that a host of cultural stuff (politics, religion, history, art, and music, to name but a few) contributes to the internal dimensions of a text. I encourage them to attend public university lectures, especially academic ones. In two recent general education sections, I encouraged students to attend a scientific lecture on String Theory, then connect it to the painting String Theory, on exhibition at the Meadow Brook Art Gallery. Isn't it curious, I posed, that these two artists, the Columbia University famous scientist Brian Green, and the Detroit-based black artist Peter Williams, unknown to each other and culturally and geographically distant, were working in the very same medium, studying and theorizing strings in seemingly dissimilar (I don't believe that art and physics are all that dissimilar) academic venues. That the Green lecture at Meadow Brook Theater was adjacent to the Williams exhibition at the Meadow Brook Gallery comments in a curious way on that very nexus of relationship.

The question central to my pedagogical philosophy is how to make learning and literature culturally relevant, how to make them matter. While, indeed, a work of art exists on its own merit without the need to articulate any moral or advocate any political agenda, literature, I find, is most relevant when students are able to see it interacting meaningfully and provocatively with culture. Thus, the questions I frame and the ways I want students to think about literature pertain to how and where we live. I want students to perceive art both as individual expression and cultural artifact, that while it reflects a singular, perhaps even privileged, view, it also addresses human and cultural concerns, whether gender, economic, relational, racial, or environmental. Questions on Dickens's *Hard Times*, for example, can be: "Who is Dickens's spokesperson (s) for social justice? What makes this person the Dickensian moral voice? And what does s/he prescribe?" And, "Does Tom Grandgrind's painted black face in the novel reinforce the racializing of crime (that the face of

crime is black) or does it, rather, draw attention to the pernicious stereotype?" I attempt to show my students that these questions often have multiple answers and responses. The real value of a good question is not the ready answer it yields, but its ability to resist easy answers all the while pushing us beyond the question itself. Literature, I believe (and perhaps only literature), is most alive within the silent spaces of a text.

In more personal ways, I would define my teaching style as that of friendly exchanges among a community of inquisitive learners. Perhaps the two words that define that style is "passion" and "relevance." I am passionate about literature and attempt always in my class to make it relevant. My style raises questions about the complexity of a text and its embedded instabilities. I focus largely on the art of reading, on close textual analysis: how to interpret, how to draw inferences, and how to arrive at probable and substantiated conclusions. My teaching style also seeks to derive relevant information about the text's particular culture and explore ways in which that culture addresses concerns in ours, among them issues of poverty, injustice, exclusion, sexism, and racism.

As far as teaching methodology goes, I try to conceive a 200 level general education course in ways not significantly different from an advanced seminar. Even in such large classes (and I know that there are even larger classes where this becomes more of a challenge if not an impossibility), my pedagogy is always discussion based. While lectures serve an invaluable role in acquainting students with rudimentary information and establishing relevant contexts to advanced ideas, I soon move away from this method to smaller and more intimate group settings, out of which discussion emerges and more probing questions are broached. I divide my 200 level classes into small groups, with approximately 10 students in each group. More individual attention is available in these small groups, and students become engaged in collaborative learning. The groups then shares their findings and difficulties with the rest of the class. This method of teaching also empowers the more reticent student. My advanced classes are engaged in more discussion, and are also directed to works of criticism and critical approaches to literary texts. These smaller classes are almost never assigned quizzes nor daily writing exercises. Instead, they often have required presentations and are expected from the outset to be thinking about their research project, which might be directed research based on my current research project and its relevance to the course.

Finally, my teaching is significantly informed by my research, and teaching in turn often determines the direction of my research. Whenever possible, I look for opportunities to introduce my research within the class setting, especially in my upper-division classes and graduate seminars. The profession, as it is constituted, simply offers too little non-instructional time to devote oneself solely to research; so years ago, I discovered that if I am to be a publishing scholar (and a teacher is always a scholar, if not a publishing one), it can only be accomplished during and between semesters and cannot simply be left to three months in the summer. Teaching never ceases to excite me. We as professors serve a vital role in educating tomorrow's leaders. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the direction our nation and the world take is contingent in no small way on the caliber of students we prepare here at Oakland.

**Teaching & Learning Workshop
Dispelling Myths: Using Technology in the Classroom**

February 5, 2003

11:30 a.m.

Lake Superior B in the Oakland Center

The Teaching and Learning Committee is hosting a workshop featuring three Oakland University faculty -- John McEneaney from the Department of Reading & Language Arts, Joel Russell from the Department of Chemistry, and David Sidaway from the Department of Accounting — who will share their experiences using technology in the university classroom. A luncheon will be included in the workshop and discussion about technology and teaching can continue during the luncheon.

There is no cost to those attending but you need to reserve a place at the workshop and may do so by contacting Kay Palmer at 370-2876 or via email at palmer@oakland.edu

The Teaching and Learning Committee
hopes you will join us on February 5, 2003.

**2001-2002
TEACHING & LEARNING
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Susan Awbrey
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**INSIGHTS & IDEAS
NEWSLETTER**

**Joyce Wiencek & Sam
Rosenthal (Editors)**

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