

The Deep End

Still Rallying Supporters of Teaching Gary Poole, Former STLHE President

On two occasions in the month of May, 2001, I was asked to speak publicly about the value that Canadian universities currently place on teaching (and, concomitantly, student learning). This issue is neither new nor resolved. In 1991, Stuart Smith concluded, in his well-known Commission of Inquiry Report, that: "Teaching is seriously undervalued at Canadian universities and nothing less than a total re-commitment to it is required" (p. 63). Six years later, Ron Smith, working at the time at Concordia, published a position paper in the STLHE newsletter entitled, "Making Teaching Count in Canadian Higher Education: Developing a National Agenda". In that article, Ron challenged us to envision what universities would be like if teaching really mattered.

As I said recently to an audience at the University of Ottawa, the rallying cry has been issued. Now, some ten years after one Smith and four years after another, the question remains: Who heard it?

It would be inaccurate to say that this rallying cry fell entirely on deaf ears. Those of us working in faculty development certainly heard it. Then again, some of us were issuing it. If the establishment of instructional development centres is any indication, then senior administrations heard the cry, at least faintly. At the time of Stuart Smith's report, many of us working in faculty development wondered from day to day if our centres would survive. At each of our national meetings, we would breathe collective sighs of relief as colleagues walked through the door.

Today, most Canadian universities have well-established [instructional development centres](#), though their personalities may be changing as they form partnerships with offices of learning technology. We have worked hard to endorse the scholarship of teaching and to send the message that we are not centres of remediation. Paradoxically, I sometimes wonder if this albeit necessary message hasn't trapped us into a "preaching to the converted" paradigm. Regardless, if teaching really mattered at our universities, everyone who teaches would be walking through our doors, not just those who have an intrinsic affinity for teaching or those who were encouraged by an exasperated department chair to see us.

Clearly, hundreds of faculty have either not heard the rallying cry or have chosen to ignore it. More to the point, those who have chosen to ignore it have been allowed to do so. Have you ever heard a department chair lament their powerlessness regarding a full professor who does an abysmal job of teaching a course required by the department's majors, resulting in a significantly lower number of majors than might otherwise be expected? Even worse, some faculty are encouraged to ignore the cry. How many of us know of a pre-tenure colleague who was chastised (mildly or otherwise) for winning a teaching award?

In my experience, there exists a grand contradiction in all of this. Faculty members say that they would put more work into their teaching if the system actually rewarded it according to a true 40-40-20 policy. Senior administrators, on the other hand, say that they would gladly favour a true 40-40-20, but that the faculty don't want this split because they are trained as researchers and so want research to form the primary basis for their evaluation. Perhaps the psychologists' term "pluralistic ignorance" which applies to inaccurate perception of group opinion is relevant here. Specifically, it refers to situations in which people are misled by the common behaviour they observe in their environment (for example, the lack of emphasis on teaching) into believing that their own opinions (for example, regarding the importance of teaching) are less widely shared than they actually are.

This frustrating contradiction is well illustrated by attitudes and practices regarding the [teaching dossier](#). In some departments, the dossier is not only mandatory, but also embraced for the professional approach

to teaching accountability it engenders. In other departments, it is rejected as more work for little benefit. In these departments, faculty members don't want to create dossiers and tenure and promotion committees don't want to read them. As one department chair at a university that shall remain nameless said to me at the end of a three-hour workshop on teaching evaluation, "It is well known who our good and bad teachers are. This is just a lot of unnecessary work to confirm what we already know."

Of course, we also know who our good and bad researchers are, but that doesn't for a minute stop us from going through the arduous task of evaluating research. Why? Because the process of evaluation speaks to our value of that enterprise. Teaching deserves no less. We still need to rally.

Through all this, I am an optimist; admittedly, perhaps naively so. I believe that, some day, all university faculty will receive at least basic levels of training, many will take advanced courses and workshops. I believe that the teaching dossier will become as mandatory as the research file. More importantly, I believe that the distinction between teaching and research will lose its utility. Perhaps we will follow the lead of [Ernest Boyer](#) and talk about faculty and students alike being engaged in "scholarship" in all its various important forms.

You see, I also believe that one day we will find a cure for cancer. But how? Through research, I hear you answer without hesitation. True, but who is going to teach all the would-be researchers, oncologists, nurses, technologists and others who will make the crucial discoveries? Perhaps the rallying cry will truly be heard when we accept that teaching and research are not mutually exclusive activities but pieces of the same puzzle - the puzzle that represents our scholarly quest for knowledge and understanding.

References:

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Smith S. (1991) *Commission of inquiry on Canadian University Education*. Ottawa: Association of Universities and Colleges.