The 3M awards: Our best teachers

With universities emphasizing teaching, these 10 lead the way

BY KEN MACQUEEN & NICHOLAS KÖHLER

It's a funny thing about great teachers. They know when to shut up. Talk to enough of them—the sort whose passion, preparation and skill elevate a university course into a life lesson—and they all say much the same thing. Zip it. Let the students do the thinking.

"I consider a class hour to be a dismal failure if my voice is the only one sounding forth on the topic or the text of the moment," says Judy Brown, a senior instructor in the department of English at the University of British Columbia. Adds Dennis Krebs, a psychology professor at Simon Fraser University: "The hardest thing for me in teaching is to keep my mouth shut. I'm always bursting forth."

Brown and Krebs are among 10 professors named this year as 3M National Teaching Fellows, the country's most prestigious university teaching award. They join a community of more than 200 to receive the honour since its inception in 1986. The award was the inspiration of John Myser, then-president of 3M Canada, who wanted to honour those who guided his education. He committed his company to this long-running sponsorship, in collaboration with the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE), to foster the magic of teaching and academic leadership. Maclean's became the media partner for the awards in 2006.

The 3Ms over the past two decades have served not only to celebrate great teachers, but to elevate their status within academia. Teaching has rarely been accorded the same respect at the university as research. But more universities now realize that training new professors to teach is key to retaining students, says Arshad Ahmad, an associate professor at the John Molson School of Business at Montreal's Concordia University, and coordinator for the 3Ms. "The high dropout rates are in the first year," says Ahmad, himself a 3M fellow. "You've got to get your best teachers up front, and it's usually the newly hired who teach these newcomers."

The 3M fellows will gather in Edmonton this June for a meeting of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. They'll also attend a retreat this November at the Fairmont Le Château Montebello in Quebec. The community of 3M fellows are starting an online academic journal on the scholarship of teaching. Many will also contribute to a book to be published next year. The topic, appropriately, is Silence in Teaching and Learning. Among the 2007 fellows:

**THIS YEAR'S 3M TEACHING FELLOWS**

In 1986, to recognize the importance of university teaching, the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and 3M Canada created the 3M Teaching Fellowships. Up to 10 university faculty members are recognized each year for their exceptional contributions to teaching and learning. Since 2006, Maclean's has proudly been the program's media sponsor.

This year's 3M Teaching Fellows, from left to right: JUDY BROWN, department of English, University of British Columbia; DAVID DiBATTISTA, department of psychology, Brock University; JON HOUSEMAN, department of biology, University of Ottawa; HARRY HUBBALL, department of curriculum studies, University of British Columbia
DENNIS KREBS, Psychology  
Simon Fraser University  
It was 1970 and the newly minted Dr. Krebs was an academic high flyer. He'd parlayed a B.A. from UBC into a fellowship to Harvard. Within three years he had his doctorate, and an assistant professorship. He enthusiastically launched into his first Harvard lecture course, modelling his style on his favourite professors. It was a disaster. The next edition of the Harvard student Blue Book (that era's version of ratemyprofessors.com) labelled his course: "For Masochists Only."

It was devastating, humbling and perfectly understandable. He knew plenty about psychology; the teaching, somehow, was expected to come naturally. "Nobody gave me a tip, offered me a word, suggested a course," he says. "People who will teach our elementary and high school students take courses on teaching and get a degree. Then you get university professors. They come out of graduate school and pop in front of a class with no training whatsoever."

For Krebs, getting better involved self-diagnosis, hard work and the realization that his students didn't want a bad imitation of his revered professors. "I needed to find my own style." Krebs is a leading researcher and writer in the field of altruism and morality, but serving students is his first priority. "They have the right to get their money's worth," he says. "It is unfair to students not to do one's best to help them learn."

Krebs takes a three-pronged approach to his student focus. He was worked throughout the university to foster teaching skills for faculty and graduate students. And he chaired a draining five-year consultation and implementation process that redesigned the entire university undergraduate curriculum. Graduates will now leave with a true liberal arts education, one that focuses on writing skill, quantitative reasoning, and mandatory courses beyond their chosen faculty. He also brought change to his own classes. A visit to a fourth-year seminar on the Evolution of Morality found Krebs sitting at the side of the room while two students ran the show. "The professor is there to facilitate not to lecture," says Heather Weldon, a psychology major. "You lecture and you're picking the brain of one person as a student. But if it's a seminar like this, you're picking the brains of everyone in the class." At times, an animated Krebs seemed to physically restrain himself, determined to let the students work through the logic with minimal guidance. "It's way easier to just tell people what you know," he says with a grin. But as he learned years ago: making teaching look easy is the hardest thing of all.

JUDY BROWN, English  
University of British Columbia  
It's the first day Brown's second-year Canadian literature class is studying Wayson Choy's novel All That Matters, the portrait of a Chinese family in Vancouver in the 1930s and '40s. Brown goes around the room. One student asks why Choy writes the Chinese dialect in incomplete sentences. Another asks about the impact of birth order; another about the "ghost papers," the dubious documentation that brought many into Canada.

The class is multiracial; a significant number are of Chinese origin. At some point, their families may have lived what Choy writes. "Student questions can sometimes direct where a class is going to go. I think that's when teaching is really happening," says Brown. "Those students can help enrich the study of this text for the whole class, and for myself as well."

Brown's classes range from seminars to big class lectures. Her courses are dynamic, well prepared, but with room for spontaneity. Classes that fall flat, she's learned, are usually over-scripted, "where I haven't left room for my students," she says. Her own agenda is jotted. She's written books on the pedagogy of writing, she's a popular thesis supervisor in her specialty areas of Canadian and children's literature, and she mentors students scattered around the world in the university's arts co-op program, as well as gifted high school students in a university transition program.

As part of the selection process for the 3M, contenders are asked to describe their teaching philosophy. "Teach is a wonderful little verb, I think," she wrote. "Sharp-sounding and monosyllabic, it has the ring of integrity about it. Under siege in these times by wordsmiths who prefer those more fine-sounding synonyms and euphemisms—facilitation, pontificate, lecture, hold forth—the word 'teach' stands its ground."

"I teach, and proudly so."

HARRY HUBBALL,  
Curriculum Studies  
University of British Columbia  
While there's a bit of ham in many a teacher, Hubball is emphatic that he isn't a performer. "I don't like that term," he says. There's something glib about it that doesn't sit well with a man known for meticulous preparation, prodigious workload and commitment to teamwork. "For me, it's showing that you care, but with your sleeves rolled up, ready..."
to get into the game with students and really enjoy it," he says in a gentle English accent. Hubball arrived at UBC from England in 1992 to take a graduate degree and advance his career as a physical education teacher. He paid for his doctorate by taking an increasingly load as a sessional lecturer. The university discovered a brilliant teacher, albeit one who was winging it in those early days on the strength of his intuition. Hubball, inspired by the classroom and increasingly fascinated by the scholarship of teaching and learning, found a home for both at UBC. He joined the faculty in 2000, and teaches physical health and outdoor education within the faculty of education and writes extensively on teaching and program development.

He also helped develop, in 1998, UBC's faculty certificate program in teaching and learning. The program, which he coordinates, introduces top UBC professors to the research and scholarship behind good teaching, creating a ripple effect across the campus. It also draws faculty from other universities. Hubball consults across the country on reforming curricula to achieve better student outcomes. "He is the type of teacher everyone remembers, respects and is forever grateful for," says Tanya Kippin, a high-school teacher and former student.

**IVAN STEINER, Medicine**

University of Alberta

Ivan Steiner, a doctor of emergency medicine, remembers a night many years ago when a patient in his care took a turn for the worse. Steiner, then a student intern working in the intensive care unit, panicked, calling his instructor. What should he do? The teacher asked him what he believed he ought to do. Steiner told him. "Do it," said the teacher, "and call me back when you're done." Steiner inserted a tube down the patient's throat and a hefty intravenous needle into the patient's neck. "It was the first time that I did it all myself," Steiner says now.

Recognized now as one of the University of Alberta's most gifted teachers, it's the man on the other end of that telephone who Steiner recalls when asked about his own great teachers. "He trusts me, he believes in me, therefore, I'm okay," Steiner remembers thinking that night three decades ago.

Steiner aspires to be like those teachers in his own past who "didn't take the bat out of my hand. They allowed me to swing—and to miss." It's a method of teaching he's since entrenched in U of A's emergency medicine program. "Dr. Steiner's approach encourages the learner to act as if he or she were the independent physician in an emergency situation," reads the letter from Steiner's faculty in support of his 3M application. Though Steiner and other professors hover always in the background to ensure patient safety, it is the learner who is permitted the lead—rounding manure disposal in his native Holland (for the record, much of it is shipped to France). Such interaction could look like a free-for-all. It's not, says 20-year-old Jenna Williams, an aspiring farmer, "because we get involved—this is what we want to do.

That's just what Robinson wants to hear. A compact, wiry man with a police officer's moustache, Robinson could be called slight were it not for a quiet, off-the-wall kind of charisma—one that finds expression in asking the sorts of questions that, initially at least, appear to come from the absurdist end of agriculture. "Why do cattle eat their placentas? Do they like the taste or is it peer pressure?" Or try: "Can horses fake pregnancy?" Or: "How many cows would it take to power your home theatre system?"

Such inquiries form the basis of Robinson's teaching—and particularly of the now-famed "There's a Heifer in Your Tank," an annual variety show Robinson dreamed up. Actually an ingenious teaching method, "Heifer" sees students assigned questions—the above are lifted from past extravaganzas—to research, design skits around and perform before an audience. A very large audience. Its most recent iteration drew a crowd of nearly 700. "It's like Saturday Night Live agriculture," says Cynthia Fawcett, communications director with the U of A's faculty of agriculture, forestry, and home economics. Replete with campy cow costumes and sometimes racy humour, the shows have made Robinson Edmonton's impresario of animal husbandry-based theatre. They've also offered him a way to permit junior students the inquiry-based learning that in the past was reserved for upper-level courses.

It was not always thus. Robinson, also the faculty's associate dean (academic), confesses that, 20 years ago, he delivered the same tired lectures. Then he noticed something. Every once in a while—a plane on an airplane to a conference somewhere, say—a neighbouring passenger would inevitably look over and ask Robinson why chickens dominated his laptop screen. The exchange would develop into informal sessions—just conversation, really—on everything from poultry farming to mad cow to avian flu. "It's the most effective teaching I do," he says of his airplane chatter.

Robinson soon realized that teaching students how to articulate and present learning—just as though they were on that airplane beside him—would be the most valuable lesson he could give them. In unengaged, rote-for-exam learning, students "aren't picking anything up in value-added format," says Robinson. "A lot of people know a lot of material," says Robinson. "Very few can communicate it." Robinson's not done, either. "I think one day we'll be doing Heifer in Your Tank—the musical."