Teaching What's Important

Educating students for today and tomorrow

Highlights from the 2015 TLS Symposium

About TLS

Teaching and Learning Services supports the McGill commitment to provide all students with a stimulating, innovative and inquiry-based educational experience. We work with faculty, staff and students to create a culture that promotes the importance of teaching and learning – both inside and outside the classroom. We offer individual consultations, program-specific initiatives and university-wide workshops in an effort to continuously explore new ways of encouraging excellence in teaching and learning.

About the Symposium

On December 11, 2015, Teaching and Learning Services held a day-long symposium for faculty with a focus on translating aspirations for student learning into pedagogical strategies. 135 people from across the university (mostly faculty members, but also staff and some students) engaged in reflection and discussion about undergraduate teaching at McGill. The symposium included two panels that celebrated work already being done and a teaching lab where instructors developed new pedagogical strategies tailored to their own contexts.

Collaboration/teamwork

Communication skills

Creativity

Critical thinking

Discipline specific skills & knowledge

Foresighted thinking

Information literacy

Intellectual curiosity

Intellectual autonomy

Intercultural knowledge & competence

Leadership

Learning to learn

Lifelong learning

Linking theory & practice

Local & global citizenship

Problem solving

Professional ethics & integrity

Research skills

Self-reflection & critique

Transfer of knowledge & skills to the real world

Aspirations for student learning

At TLS, we have the privilege of working with professors from across the university, and in our experience, lofty aspirations for student learning are the norm. Professors are asking: How do we get students to become more engaged, not just as students, but as citizens? How do we ensure that students graduate with the ability to make decisions based on evidence? To develop in-depth knowledge of a field? To communicate across disciplinary borders? To collaborate in cross-cultural teams? To act with integrity?

We wanted participants to engage with one question in particular from the moment they registered online for the symposium: **In your opinion, what is the most important thing for McGill students to learn at university?**

The responses were extraordinary. Here are a few examples:

- How to align their unique gifts and talents with their passion for developing the skills and knowledge necessary to make a meaningful contribution to the world.
- The ability to communicate ideas and values as effectively and ethically as possible.
- To be a creative thinker who pushes the boundaries and tries new approaches or ideas even when everyone is telling you no! This includes pushing the university's boundaries.

We grouped these aspirations by theme and assigned one theme to each table (please see the sidebar for the complete list). Before and after the panel discussions, participants at each table discussed the significance of their assigned theme and worked on defining the behaviours, skills and attitudes that students would gain if they were progressing towards these aspirations. These ideas were recorded on flipchart paper and posted around the room for all to see.

All 20 groups developed ideas and strategies that can move us closer to achieving our collective aspirations for student learning. But this symposium only marked the beginning. To truly achieve such ambitious goals for student learning, we must continue these cross-disciplinary conversations and involve more members of the McGill community – students, staff and faculty.

Thank you to those who were involved in the thinking, planning and preparations leading up to the symposium as well as those who attended on the actual day. Looking forward to continuing the conversation!

Marcy Slapcoff and Eva Dobler
Symposium Co-organizers, Teaching and Learning Services

Opening panel

The symposium began with a panel discussion moderated by Bruce Lennox, Dean, Faculty of Science, who asked panelists to respond to this question: **What is most important for undergraduate students to learn at McGill?**

Panel participants:

- Alan Chen, Undergraduate student, Interfaculty Program in Sustainability, Science and Society
- Elena Bennett, Associate Professor, Department of Natural Resource Sciences & McGill School of Environment
- Ken Dryden, Professor of Practice, McGill Institute for the Study of Canada

Here are some of the key themes that emerged …

Engaging with the world

The most important thing for us students to learn is that we don't have to wait until we finish university to begin engaging with the real world. I think students have more creativity, more wisdom and more power than they often realize. There's a flourishing ecology of individuals and initiatives at McGill that can promote the discovery of this potential through participation. Learning through experience can be incredibly powerful especially in terms of shaping our sense of self and purpose.
– Alan Chen

We really need to be teaching students how to be in the world and how to be a force for good in the world.
– Elena Bennett

Importance of failure

One of the things that you learn through sport or through the arts is to fail all the time. It's what we do. Everything that we attempt to do … almost everything that we attempt to do goes wrong. We have to find a way of not being overwhelmed by that.
– Ken Dryden

I think universities aren't the best place for students to fail. We need to create that space for practicing new skills and having the bravery to embark on journeys that take us to new skills and new levels of learning.
– Alan Chen

Give them a chance to practice where failure doesn't have a gigantic implication for their career but where failure has a gigantic implication for their ability to learn how to do it better the next time.
– Elena Bennett

Uncertainty

Conversations about the future are interesting because you're moving into something that is uncertain. You're moving into something that there aren't really answers for and you have to puzzle through them and you have to puzzle with others about them.
– Ken Dryden

Taking pedagogical risks

Our students are incredibly powerful. We can – provided it's guided and reasonable – take a lot of risk in terms of introducing changes, not just to our courses, but to the programming in these courses.
– Bruce Lennox

Building on students' potential

When I came to McGill, I realized that when faculty believe their students can be successful, this creates buy-in like nothing else … we have to make sure we keep that value. When students get the sense that they can be successful from the first half hour, of the first class, each year – really great things can happen.
– Bruce Lennox

Professor-student showcase: Highlights from inside and outside the classroom

There are already many instructors providing students with exciting and meaningful learning experiences. To highlight some of the excellent work already being done at McGill, five pairs of students and professors reflected on a meaningful instructional experience they shared and provided examples of how their aspirations were translated into real educational experiences, inside and outside the classroom.

MIME 345: Applications of polymers (60 students)

For Prof. Marta Cerruti, Mining and Materials Engineering, respect is paramount. She avoids "dumping" information on her students and emphasizes a safe environment where students can engage with the material and make mistakes. Her favourite technique is to frequently get students into small groups for one or two minutes to try to answer questions or make predictions. Some of the groups are then asked to share their answers with everyone.

Richard Church, student:

"I felt more inclined to pay attention during class because I wanted to have something to contribute to the group when the time came for the discussion. It also gave me the opportunity to interact with some of my peers – to bounce some of my ideas off them and to listen to them, and get some different perspectives on the material."

ORGB 321: Leadership (40 students)

Prof. Patricia Hewlin, Desautels Faculty of Management, is concerned that students in their final year still have difficulty saying, "This is what I'm good at. I bring something divergent, unique and valuable to a variety of contexts." She wants students to learn to play to their strengths. With that purpose in mind, she assigns students the task of asking 5-8 individuals who know them well, "What are my core strengths?" Students then have to identify the key themes and propose how they intend to use these strengths in their professional lives.

Sarah Devine, student:

"I think that probably the greatest benefit of this project was the greater sense of self awareness that I achieved. As I go forward and enter the workforce, I really want to know what my strengths are and how I can best position myself to employers and to my peers, and just really the world in general."

ANTH 201: Prehistoric archaeology (188 students)

Prof. André Costopoulos, Anthropology, likes to arrange his lectures each term according to a central question that has no easy answer. Students respond to this question in two assignments. Each student posts their first assignment (250 words) anonymously on the myCourses discussion board. This creates a body of literature for all students to reference in their second assignment (500 words). André Costopoulos: "You take a bunch of people who have less background than the average professor, and you engage them with a big question. What happens is they look at it in a completely new way. When 150 people are doing this, interesting new stuff happens and it's very thought provoking."

Rachel Van Vliet, student:

"The most important part of this was creating a body of literature—something you rarely get to do in a conventional classroom. As a second year anthropology student, when I read academic texts, I wonder if I have the right to criticize the work of someone who has spent 20 years of their life focusing on this one topic. Being able to actually interact with all these academic texts by your peers, you are finally in that position of being the expert."

AGRI 215: Agro-ecosystems field course (45 students)

Dr. Caroline Begg, Plant Science, who co-teaches AGRI 215 with Prof. Roger Cue, has students visit 11 farms and keep a journal of their observations. The instructors provide some questions, but the students are strongly encouraged to ask the farmers any question they want. The goal is for these first-year students to learn how to observe complex systems and analyze them in terms of sustainability.

Valérie Toupin-Dubé, student:

"It forces you to start engaging in analysis and critical thinking, and that's important for the rest of your time at school and in life. I also learned that leadership is not about thinking that you're going to be leading everybody else with your ideas. It's about participating in a discussion and learning that I don't have the 'Truth.' Together, we're going to be learning and learning, and that learning is not going to stop at the end of the course."

McGill Dentistry Outreach Program (40 students/year)

Dr. Kwong Li is the Director of the McGill Dentistry Outreach Program. The main purpose of the outreach program is to provide dental care at no cost to the underprivileged population in the Montreal community. The secondary purpose is to serve as an educational tool for our dental students.

Ryan Siciliano, student:

"This experience provides us with the bigger picture. In classes, we see what is medically relevant, but in the outreach clinic, we get to see what the patients need and what the system needs to provide for patients who can't get proper dental care."

Teaching Lab

During the afternoon, Teaching Lab participants worked individually and with peers to develop strategies to translate their aspirations for student learning into reality. This was a hands-on session where participants worked through a set of questions and exchanged feedback. To inspire participants to try something new, we shared examples from the many instructors who have, over the years, shared their favourite assignments with us. For this symposium, we converted these examples into a set of strategy cards, which we distributed. We hope that seeing a variety of examples from other McGill instructors will encourage others to experiment with new activities in the classroom.

Here is a sample of these strategy cards …

Developing questions

Elena Bennett, McGill School of Environment

- At the end of each class, Prof. Bennett gives students an index card and asks them to write one good exam question based on what was covered in that class. On the back of the card they have to provide the answer.
- This exercise has multiple purposes: on a basic level, it allows Prof. Bennett to see who's coming to class.
- More importantly, it provides her with feedback about the effectiveness of her lectures and allows her to follow individuals to see who is struggling.
- Before exams, Prof. Bennett uses these questions to help students review and prepare. She picks the best questions from each week and hands them out for students to ask each other in a round-robin format.

Course:
Undergraduate classes at the MSE

Class level:
Undergraduate

Oral history reflection

Allan Downey
History and Classical Studies

- Students focus on the questions "How can universities decolonize?" and "How can we Indigenize universities and incorporate Indigenous knowledge and perspectives into post-secondary education?"
- Students watch the film Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner; listen to at least three stories from Louis Bird (ourvoices.ca) and read three stories from Collections Canada.
- Students write a 6-8 page reflection essay on how the inclusion of Indigenous worldviews could have a positive impact towards decolonizing universities in their field of study.
- Prof. Downey hopes the students can place themselves in the centre of reflection and think critically about their educational experience, in much the way oral tradition does this for storytellers.

Course: Introduction to Indigenous Studies

Class level: 200-level

Course: Essential Biology

Class level: 100-level

Class size: 250 students

3-part media assignment

Tamara Western, Biology

- This assignment was added to complement multiple-choice exams.
- 3 short writing assignments designed to make students look into Biology in the world around them.
- Students relate class content to science items in the news and in movies / television.
    - In Part 1, they identify the source and reflect on whether the source is scientifically reliable.
    - In Part 2, they relate a different article to class material.
- Part 3: In small groups, students analyze how accurately biology-related science is depicted in a movie or television program.
- Assignments are short: ½ page to 3 pages.

In-class survey

Rhonda Amsel, Psychology

- Students respond to questions on an in-class survey (e.g., about their height, age, sleep patterns, breakfast eating habits, expected grade for the course).
- The data are compiled in an Excel spreadsheet and used throughout the stats course to demonstrate different methods of statistical analysis.
- This makes statistics personally relevant to the students. It also increases their engagement during the class, as students know that they and their classmates are represented in the data. Finally, it gives the professor a better sense of the students.

Course: Introduction to Psychological Statistics

Class level: 200-level

Class size: 400-500 students

Policy brief

Madhav Badami, Urban Planning

- Students pretend they are environmental analysts advising a decision maker, e.g., the Canadian Minister of Environment, the President of the USA.
- Students write 4-5 pages on a specific issue addressing the following questions:
- Why is this issue important?
- What is already being done?
- What are the pros and cons of the current approach(es)?
- What alternative approach would the student suggest?
- The instructions for the assignment include a detailed description of a typical policy brief.

Course: Environmental Policy and Planning

Class level: 500-level

Class size: 25-30 students

What are your aspirations for student learning?

This symposium began a university-wide conversation about turning aspirations for student learning into real educational strategies.

Here are some questions for students, staff and faculty at McGill that were touched on at the symposium:

- Why are these aspirations important in terms of a McGill undergraduate education?
- How can we integrate these aspirations into course and program learning outcomes?
- How can we assess student progress towards these outcomes? What behaviours, skills and attitudes demonstrate progress towards these aspirations?
- How can we overcome resistance to trying new approaches and taking risks?
- How can faculty best communicate the value of these aspirations to students?

For support in developing your own set of meaningful aspirations for student learning, please contact Teaching and Learning Services.

McGill | Teaching and Learning Services

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