

Teaching is a challenging and rewarding responsibility



Granddaughter Aspen Kate and Big Willy discuss some of the strategies used in tic-tac-toe at a MUN Awards ceremony. (photo: Richard Blenkinsopp).

Birds I View
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Some teachers have had formative influences on my education, orientation and career path. I too have had the opportunity to influence students.

As an undergraduate, my interests were in experimental psychology, animals, wildlife and environmental photography. My primary motivation for scholarship and research came from a rough and tumble prof whom I experienced in my final year at Northeastern University in Boston.

Things were different then. He was a chain-smoker in the classroom and lectured like a football coach. During our first class, he warned “look at the student to your right and the one to your left, by the end of the semester only one of you will be here.” A rather terrifying initiation.

The workload was huge. Our major assignment was an independent experiment and term report. I worked hard at it but knew what I produced was marginal. It bothered me. As part of the assignment, we had to meet one-on-one with the prof and discuss the project. I was intimidated by the prospect and wondered how he would evaluate my work.

We met and discussed the research paper. Then it came time for his overall evaluation and assessment. I almost cowered waiting for his decree. He looked me straight in the eye and said “Bill, keep writing.” I was elated (though I didn’t show it). Whether he knew it or not, it was just the affirmation that I needed at the time. I could do it if I just kept working at it. I have been hard at it ever since. Thank you Dr. Charles Karas.

The most disappointing aspect of all of this is that I never thanked him, even though I had the opportunity. Two lessons learned – never hold back giving thanks even if feels awkward and more subtlety as a teacher you could positively (or negatively) impact a student without even knowing.

While I do not consider myself an outstanding teacher, at times I have been taken aback by former students who tell me how much they enjoyed a course or even better how I helped them move forward with their perspective, education and career.

I recognize and value these qualities in many the teachers, instructors and assistants who taught our children in pre-school, elementary, middle and high school and in university. I see this in those who are teaching our grandchildren today. So much of what they do is unsung and even unappreciated. But they are true to the core and every day they rise and embrace the challenges and the children. Thank you for all that you do.

The most interesting part of teaching is that it is always a two-way street. Student learns from teacher and teacher learns from student. As I supervise and teach now, it is a given that the students have capabilities that are beyond my own. Yet my responsibility is at a higher level of guidance, orientation and directionality. We strive for everyone’s personal best.

My grounding in Newfoundland

Les Tuck was the last Dominion wildlife officer before Confederation and the first Canadian Wildlife biologist just after it. He wrote two marvelous and well-acclaimed books – *The Murres* and *The Snipes*. As he was retiring, I was just beginning my career in Newfoundland.

His knowledge of birds, wildlife and the environment overwhelmed me. I could not fathom how he could integrate and synthesize so much knowledge. I now know that decades of experience are required to gain and hone such wisdom and that failures are big part of moving forward.

He treated me like a protégé and arranged my initial research visit to Funk Island to continue his research. Vice-President Les Harris appointed him as a John Lewis Paton Chair in the Psychology Department at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador. His office was next to mine, and I had the opportunity to complete a book he started, *Newfoundland Birds: Exploitation, Study, Conservation*. What goes around comes around and I now hold a John Lewis Paton Professorship.

Learning and teaching are life-long experiences. They enrich our lives and affirm our relationships with others and with the natural world in which we are embedded.

Birds I View columns are available at <http://play.psych.mun.ca/~mont/outreach.html>.
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