

# The Story of the Empty Chair, or Learning from Teaching

Opening speech by Alan Ableson at the Teaching Awards Reception on December 4, 2012

I would like to

year, you hit your stride in the course: it was now yours, you had strategies, you had fun remarks you could throw in, and stories from previous classes to share. You really started to think about what you were doing, and how you might change to things in the future, to really get at what you wanted the students to learn, to experience. Yes, by the third year teaching that course, things were going very well.

Now imagine ... that you're Fred. Yes: your teaching career is over. Maybe you are transferred to a non-teaching position, or you go back into industry, whatever. The key is that you never teach in a classroom again.

Now imagine the entire university, imagine Queen's, working that way. Where are my 1-3 year teaching experience people again? You are now the only people left in the faculty. Good luck!

So that's a pretty scary scenario, and it doesn't seem undergraduate institutions in the United States: the West Point Military Academy (or "RMC South", as I

Think back to when you first started teaching, and think of the first course you taught a few times. Remember the year first year you taught that class. You hopefully inherited a lot of other instructors' material, or used questions from the publisher, which helped to make it manageable, but it was still a lot of work. You made it through, but you were probably pretty glad when it was over....

In your second year, you had seen where some of the bumps were, so you tweaked your timing, massaged your syllabus a little. In your third

understand they like to be called). It is a publicly funded university that includes military training as part of an undergraduate education. Students exchange a future commitment to the military for full room and board during their time at West Point. Is it a quality institution? Well, its alumni include Pershing, Patton, Eisenhower, McChrystal and Petraeus, and for the last seven years, West Point has contributed at least one Rhodes Scholar, out of the 32 from across the entire United States. This is an institution with good students and a high quality program.

[Fun historical aside. Back in 1823, guess what first-year cadets studies all morning for 6 days a week? Mathematics. (That's the easy one: I'm from math after all...) What about all afternoon for 6 days a week? .... French! I'll leave it to the history buffs to figure out why...]

Back to our story! Now, whatever your reservations you might have about military

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classroom has one empty chair, right beside the door. That chair is there for any instructor to sit in whenever they like, for however long they like. Junior or senior faculty, the invitation to sit in is always there; you can talk about the class afterwards, or just take those moments and bring them into your teaching in your own way.

Think back to to the ‘who’ and the ‘when’ when you have learned about great teaching. What was in common in the most powerful of those experiences? For most of us, it was ‘being there’, being part of that in-the-classroom shared experience that sticks with us, that informs and guides what we do ourselves. That raw shared experience can also be what makes us brave enough to try new things. Imagine having the opportunity to learn from some of the best teachers across campus; to have an open

invitation to see  
and experience  
what they do, at  
both their best  
and at their most  
experimental.  
That’s the  
opportunity of that  
empty chair.

I have personally reaped the benefits of learning from my colleagues this way. In the math department, Leo Jonker and Peter Taylor have always been generous in letting me join their classes to see how they do the great things they

