

## **Becoming a More Reflective Teacher by Serving on a University Teaching Awards Committee**

**Judy Bornais, University of Windsor,  
Andrea C. Buchholz, University of Guelph**

### **Authors' Contact Information**

*Judy Bornais, Faculty of Nursing,  
University of Windsor,  
401 Sunset Ave, Windsor ON, N9B 3P4,  
Email: [jbornais@uwindsor.ca](mailto:jbornais@uwindsor.ca)*

*Andrea C. Buchholz,  
Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition,  
University of Guelph,  
50 Stone Road East, Guelph ON N1G 2W1,  
Email: [abuchhol@uouelph.ca](mailto:abuchhol@uouelph.ca)*

### **Abstract:**

*Being nominated for and receiving a teaching award can be career-altering for university faculty members. In this reflective paper, we describe our experiences as mid-career faculty members serving on a provincial university teaching awards committee, a role which we argue can be equally career-altering. We reflect on all steps of the process, including the review of nomination dossiers of faculty members from a variety of academic disciplines and against a similarly wide variety of criteria, the selection meeting, preparing citations and feedback letters, and the awards ceremony. Each step of the process has encouraged us to view our teaching through what Stephen Brookfield refers to as an "autobiographical lens," while also considering student, colleague and theoretical perspectives of teaching and learning. Serving on a university teaching awards committee has encouraged us to evolve, both professionally and personally.*

### **Key Words:**

reflection, awards, teaching, learning, reflective teaching practice.

### **Introduction**

In his book, "Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher," Brookfield (1995) encourages us to "see our practice in new ways by standing outside ourselves and viewing what we do through four distinct lenses" (p. 28) including an autobiographical lens, our students' lens, our colleagues' lens, and a theoretical literature lens. Our experience as two mid-career faculty, being members of the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Association (OCUFA) Teaching and Academic Librarianship Awards

Committee, has encouraged us to view our teaching through an autobiographical lens, while also considering student, colleague and theoretical perspectives of teaching and learning.

Being nominated for and receiving a teaching award can be career-altering for faculty members. Madriaga and Morley (2016) reported that receiving recognition for their teaching excellence was affirming and related to personal feelings of appreciation and happiness. In addition, this study found that well over three-quarters of respondents felt that colleagues value university recognition of their teaching practice and support for their students (Madriaga & Morley). As previous award recipients, we concur with these findings and would extend them to further suggest that serving as a member of a teaching award selection committee can be equally career-altering. This paper provides reflections on all steps of the awards process, including the review of nomination dossiers, the selection meeting, preparing citations and feedback letters, and the awards ceremony. It also highlights how this type of service can have a tremendous impact not only on the award recipient but also on members of the selection committee as they critically reflect on their teaching through the process.

## **Review of Nomination Dossiers**

The Teaching and Academic Librarianship Awards Committee of OCUFA is comprised of five members: three faculty from various disciplines, one academic librarian (all typically past OCUFA award recipients), and one student representative from the Canadian Federation of Students. For two months every spring, each committee member reads dozens of nomination dossiers, approximately 60 pages in length, which are submitted by one or more nominators from the over 20 universities across the province of Ontario, Canada. Nominees represent various academic disciplines, from the humanities to the social sciences to the biological sciences. As we review the dossiers, we are challenged to consider and evaluate teaching excellence from a myriad of perspectives including, but not limited to the teaching philosophy, instructional methods, innovations in teaching, student course evaluations, student advising and support, supervision of theses, major papers or capstone experiences, course development, curriculum development, educational material development, service in teaching, educational leadership, engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning, dissemination on university teaching, and community outreach. Together, and when supported by laudatory student and peer letters, these elements comprise evidence of well-rounded excellence in teaching.

As committee members reviewing the nomination dossiers, we evaluate nominees' activities against each of these criteria, on a numerical scale. The sum of the ratings allows us to rank nominees. Using specific evaluation criteria, developed by previous award committee members and reviewed annually by the committee, is an essential component in the process. Chism's (2006) examination of 144 teaching awards at 85 United States institutions found that fewer than half of the award programs used specific assessment criteria. Clear criteria, supported by evidence of how the criteria have been met, is important for both nominees and committee members to appreciate the breadth and depth of the nominees' influence in teaching and learning. To aid nominators and nominees, a 16-page guideline for creating teaching awards nominations was

developed, with specific examples of the type of evidence that could be included for each criterion (see <http://ocufa.on.ca/assets/OCUFA-Teaching-Award-Guidelines-Feb-2016.pdf>). The importance of establishing explicit criteria and standards for teaching awards has been stressed by many researchers (Casey, Gentile, and Bigger 1997; Gibbs 1995; Kember and Kwan 2000; McAlpine and Harris 2002; Thompson et al. 1998).

In reading through the nomination dossiers, we cannot help but consider our own contributions to and productivity against each criterion, and to ask ourselves, Are we excellent teachers? How active and successful are we with respect to these many elements of teaching excellence? Consistent with Brookfield's reflective "autobiographical lens," the dossiers further challenge us to contemplate and understand why we teach in the manner we do and how we can more effectively foster student learning. Despite nominees' disciplines varying considerably from our own (JB is in nursing, ACB is in nutrition), we glean tremendous value in learning how a mathematics professor successfully turns math haters into math lovers; how a chemistry professor spontaneously breaking into song instantly engages chatty students; why a political science professor eagerly volunteers to teach a course on overload; and why a biology professor comes away from her office hours feeling invigorated and eager to try new ideas to improve her teaching. We become inspired to try new ideas and strategies that would otherwise not have occurred to us. In addition, in reading how colleagues successfully employed such strategies, we found ourselves more likely to take risks, to try some of these new ideas. Thus, the dossiers and the various elements of teaching excellence described therein, foster a desire to continually improve what we do. Similar views have also been expressed by others. For example, Skelton (2009) in writing about teaching excellence awards wrote, "teaching excellence...focuses the mind on the underlying purposes of teaching in higher education and it also represents a potent force to drive us forward in our efforts to understand and improve what we do" (p.107). Olsson and Roxå (2013) suggest that through teaching excellence awards,

Teachers document, analyse and critically evaluate their teaching ideas and methods and the learning of their students, so that the results can stimulate further development. The assumption is that rewarded teachers will continue to contribute to pedagogical development at departmental and institutional levels through active participation in the local pedagogical debate. (p. 42)

This on-going development not only exists for us as past award recipients but to a greater extent as committee members who have read and reviewed so many ideas about and approaches to teaching. Through this process we found ourselves reflecting on our own scholarship and that which exists in our departments and institutions. The process provides us with what Brookfield refers to as "critical mirrors" whereby we reflect on our own practices and aspects of our pedagogy that are effective as well as areas that may need adjustment or strengthening. In doing so, it allows us to gain a deeper understanding of who we are as faculty and what we value.

In the world of academia where we are busy planning our courses, preparing and evaluating assignments, designing and conducting research, as well as engaging in committee and service work, there is often little time to reflect, to think not only about how we teach, but also why. In fact, aside from completing a teaching dossier for tenure

and our own award nomination, we did not regularly revisit our teaching philosophies. Through serving on this committee and reading about colleagues' teaching practises, we found ourselves thinking about what we value and in doing so were reminded of how much we care about teaching. In writing about mid-career faculty Weimer (2017) wrote, "...a kind of paralyzing inertia can settle over us. We no longer have the energy or motivation to change the syllabus, alter course readings or update the assignments or activities...tired teaching happens to all of us at one time or another during our careers" (p. 5). This inertia, which both of us experienced at different points in our careers, did not exist while serving on this committee. Rather, after reading award dossiers we felt challenged and invigorated to scrutinize our assumptions about what fosters student learning and we have become more humble as individuals, realizing that we still have much to learn from those around us. As a result of our work on this committee, we have also become more energized to explore new ideas and make meaningful change for our classrooms. The impact has been significant. In continually learning about different teaching approaches we have grown in our understanding and knowledge of pedagogy, we have challenged our own assumptions, taken more risks and reflected more deeply on what works (or does not) in our classrooms. In addition, we have become more engaged with our teaching centres, offering workshops and participating in presentations on teaching and learning, wanting to share what we have tried and learned ourselves and to further learn from others. We have come to recognize that we need a network of colleagues who share our vision about the importance and necessity of effective teaching; only with such a network can we change the culture to one in which teaching is more deeply valued and worthy of improving.

### **Selection Meeting**

In our approximately three-hour deliberation meeting, each committee member presents rankings of all nominees. The field is typically narrowed to a shortlist of 12 to 15, from which we ultimately select up to five teaching award recipients. The discussion required to whittle the shortlist down is thorough and comprehensive, and reaching consensus is a critical part of the selection process. How does an academic librarian view teaching excellence? What is most important from a student's perspective? These discussions offer an opportunity for dialogue with our committee colleagues, to hear their perspectives on the various initiatives and elements of teaching excellence in the nominees' dossiers. Consistent with Brookfield's (1995) interpretation of critical reflection, through these dialogues we have the opportunity to scrutinize and reframe previous ideas, assumptions and conclusions formulated during our individual review of nomination dossiers, and to appreciate others' perspectives and the multiple ways in which excellent teachers engage students and foster learning.

Olsson and Roxå (2013) suggest that "theoretical and personalized knowledge about teaching and student learning is a fundamental part of a professional university teacher's expertise. This knowledge can be achieved through formal training in university pedagogy, but informed pedagogical discussions among colleagues are also important" (p. 50). Through our discussions with our committee colleagues around the table, we have the opportunity to develop our "pedagogical content knowledge" (Shulman, 1986). This helps us gain a greater understanding of subject-specific teaching and perspectives of teaching in a particular discipline, and the associated

techniques, methods and challenges. Reflecting on the myriad of teaching practices across different disciplines, first as individuals reviewing each dossier, and then as part of group during the selection meeting, broadens our perspectives and provides new ideas that can be implemented in our teaching, ideas that might not otherwise have been contemplated. The group process engages us in critical conversations with our colleagues, which as Brookfield points out, allows us to “notice aspects of our practice that are normally hidden from us.” (p. 30). We see our teaching practice from a new perspective and with new meaning.

### Citations and Feedback Letters

Committee members each draft and read at least one citation for the annual awards ceremony, which takes place in the fall. The citations require us to succinctly distill a 60-page nomination dossier into the most noteworthy or unique attributes of a particular educator. Stories and poignant quotes are carefully chosen to paint a picture of an outstanding instructor, mentor, scholar of teaching and learning, etc. This is more challenging than it may first appear, and comes with a substantial responsibility to accurately portray the awardee, drawing attention to accomplishments and endeavors that distinguish him/her from other nominees. Frequently, this means highlighting particularly innovative teaching methods and educational contributions. Especially noteworthy and important to include in citations are quotes and anecdotes from students describing how an instructor supported and cared about and/or profoundly inspired them. A common theme amongst letters written in support of awardees are students indicating their professor treated them *as a person*, and who cared not only about their academic success, but also their well-being. Such letters remind us as committee members that students are indeed people, and that what we observe in the classroom represents only a sliver of the sum of who they are. We look at ourselves through our students’ eyes, another of Brookfield’s critically reflective lenses and ask ourselves, “What do our students see? What is their perspective of our courses, of us as educators?” While in our classrooms and offices and labs they are primarily students, outside of, or concurrently with, these contexts, they are employees, children, parents, siblings, caregivers, commuters, etc. We are acutely reminded of the impact we may have when we acknowledge the many facets of our students, and how our words and gestures may convey this acknowledgement and help foster learning. Thus, serving on a teaching awards committee encourages us to be more sensitive and aware of the impact we may have on our students.

In reflecting on the process of writing citations, we see parallels with the attitude of inquiry required in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Whereas, “many instructors in higher education throughout the world are paying close attention to their students’ learning, reflecting on their own contributions to that learning, and making their thoughts and their work visible to others” (Bernstein, 2010, p. 1), we see writing the citations as an opportunity for us to highlight instructors’ contributions to learning, paying close attention to the learning that takes place for their students as documented in the dossier and student letters and making these contributions visible publicly.

Drafting feedback letters allows us to encourage highly ranked but unsuccessful nominees to expand their excellence to the many elements of teaching and learning,

beyond student course evaluations. As educators, we value the importance of feedback and in drafting such letters our hope is to acknowledge accomplishments, while urging nominees to focus on elements of teaching excellence either not demonstrated or adequately described in the nomination dossiers. The intention is to help nominees to further develop, or provide greater evidence in support of their teaching excellence, thereby strengthening their dossier for resubmission at a future date. As committee members, we view providing feedback as a way of mentoring, to provide excellent teachers with input on how they can further develop or strengthen their dossier. We word the feedback in a way that we would like to receive it were it directed towards us. This approach is in contrast to the typical peer review process common to manuscript submissions for a journal, for which reviewers' feedback may lean towards the impersonal and unsupportive. However, teaching is a great equalizer: regardless of our academic fields of study – biology or history, physics or sociology – at our core we are, or are striving to be, educators who reach and teach people. By helping others to do this, we are helping ourselves too (do we do what we recommend of the nominee?), and in the process, are we helping our students. This further development has been cited by Holly (1989) who suggests that appraising teaching can be an educational process that promotes professional practice. Fitzpatrick and Moore (2015) suggest that being nominated for a teaching award provides useful feedback about the quality of one's teaching which is not always available.

## Awards Ceremony

Studies have shown that “higher education teachers desire their craft to be recognized and valued by their institutions” (Madriaga & Morley, 2016, p. 173). In addition, there is tremendous value in recognizing teaching excellence at a formal event whereby award recipients are publicly acknowledged in the presence of other award recipients, faculty members from across the province, as well as significant others. In a study by Dinham and Scott (2002), positive feelings such as pride and fulfilment were cited as outcomes of teaching awards, with such recognition rarely occurring in day-to-day teaching. In our experience, hearing the laudatory accomplishments of esteemed recipients fosters pride in recipients' recognition while also serving as a way to create potential collaboration and idea sharing.

At the ceremony, each committee member is seated at a table with an award recipient and their guest(s). It is during discussions over lunch that recipients have an opportunity to discuss their teaching and accomplishments. On reflection, a common theme amongst many award recipients is the acknowledgement of the support and contributions of significant others. Indeed, the sacrifice of the recipient's time, away from home and family, dedicated to initiatives related to student learning, has been noted in award acceptance speeches repeatedly over the years. Providing recipients with an opportunity to share their stories encourages the wider community to “delight in colleagues' achievements” (Israel, 2011, p.30). Dinham and Scott (2002) report that teaching award recipients felt that there was “a need, even a hunger for feedback, recognition and affirmation” (p.11). Holding an award ceremony allows for excellence in teaching and learning to be acknowledged and more importantly, *valued* in higher education circles. Receiving a teaching award has also been found to result in career advancement including promotion, with 41% of US survey respondents having

experienced a greater degree of career enhancement which was attributed to receiving a teaching award (Dinham & Scott, 2002). Fitzpatrick and Moore (2015) also report that recipients felt that awards can positively affect promotion prospects and several teaching awards actually come with an increase in salary (Olsson & Roxå, 2013).

Each time we attend an award ceremony we are reminded of how much pride and joy comes with being recognized for one's achievements. While this seems intuitive, in a world where the need for publications and competition for grants exists, taking time to recognize and celebrate our colleagues' teaching accomplishments is infrequent if not non-existent. One of the most profound changes that has occurred in us as individuals is our desire to acknowledge and celebrate others' successes. In fact, these activities have also heightened our awareness of excellence in our own home institutions. Having been former award recipients and members of a provincial teaching awards committee has encouraged us to nominate others for awards in recognition of excellence in teaching (fellow faculty members, graduate teaching assistants), discipline specific awards, undergraduate advising (academic staff) and undergraduate and graduate student awards and achievements. We term this "award karma," which we interpret to mean that our success as award recipients encourages us draw attention to the laudable efforts of others, be they students or colleagues. Perhaps it is because through serving on this committee we have evolved professionally, gaining comfort in our own strengths and this has allowed us to move away from competing toward collaboration and the promotion of others, recognizing their strengths. We have grown to see ourselves not only as teachers but also as leaders and realize that sometimes we need to set aside our ideas to walk beside our colleagues and help move them forward. We have grown in our awareness that by acknowledging and promoting other people's accomplishments, it not only creates a more positive environment, but that it helps all of us, our colleagues, our institutions and our students.

## Conclusion

Through our experience serving on a university teaching and academic librarianship award committee, we have had the opportunity to focus on and celebrate our colleagues' teaching practices. In being reflective, we have repeatedly asked ourselves fundamental questions about what constitutes excellence in teaching and how students learn, specifically in *our* own teaching and how *our* students learn. Through reading and reviewing hundreds of pages of nomination dossiers, participating in the selection meeting, writing citations and feedback letters, and attending the award ceremony, we have grown as individuals and educators, and in our views of teaching and learning. We have tried new teaching strategies inspired by those we have read about. We have reminded ourselves of the impact of supporting and caring about students on their learning, and we have asked ourselves whether we use the feedback we provide to unsuccessful nominees in our own teaching practices. We have also gained greater awareness of our own strengths and those of our colleagues, seeing ourselves as leaders who can empower others and collaboratively influence the teaching cultures on our campuses.

Olsson and Roxå (2013) suggest that, "To become and to be an excellent teacher is a continuous endeavour rather than a fixed state" (p. 49). Through our experience as

teaching award committee members, we have continued on our journey to be excellent teachers and concur with Elton (1998) that, “if teaching quality is to be maintained and enhanced, teaching excellence must be recognized and rewarded” (p. 9). And finally, as Brookfield states, “It is in the nature of the reflective process for us to always be evolving” (p. 42). Serving on a teaching award committee has sharply focused our autobiographical lens, pushing us to evolve, both personally and professionally. We have come to see ourselves not only as teachers but also as leaders helping to increase awareness and foster conversations about the importance of teaching across university campuses, and to inspire others to strive for excellence.

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