

# Our Students Are Our Best Resource! Reflections on My Incredible Journey of 37 Years of Teaching at Vanier

Looking at the website announcing the upcoming fiftieth year anniversary of Vanier College is exciting. Indeed, such an anniversary is an important watershed. Moreover, it is one that makes me reflect upon my own years of teaching here at Vanier, particularly the transformation that my pedagogical approach has undergone.

I began teaching English at Vanier's Snowdon campus in 1982. (Yes, for our youngest faculty, there *really* was a Snowdon campus!) For the most part, the students at that campus were drawn from anglophone west-end public and private schools without a great deal of ethnic or cultural diversity. In many ways, the "fit" was perfect for me, as the hiring committee must have perceived, since I had graduated from a similar high school.

The Snowdon English department's curriculum was equally well suited to my training and my own background. The department had adopted a traditional approach, with its *Introduction to English Literature* course following a chronological pedagogy. The first semester *Introduction* began with Beowulf and Chaucer and continued to the Renaissance writers. The *Introduction Part Two* picked up at that point, continuing to the twentieth century, with an emphasis on the "great works" of each genre. This "great works" approach was very much in keeping with McGill's doctoral program in English literature, which I had recently completed. In a sense, therefore, I could see myself in these students, having learned in a similar manner and having received an education that had been structured, both in terms of concepts and content, in the same pedagogical fashion. An acquaintance of mine, a history professor at McGill, used to joke that he saw his role as "giving" his students "the history of France...from the Gauls to de Gaulle!" Our teaching orientation was as follows: one narrative, one perception, one approach. And this was pretty much the way we were teaching English at the Snowdon campus.

The academic year 1987-1988 saw the amalgamation of the two "Vaniers" at the Saint-Laurent campus. In our department, the discussions regarding the curriculum were long, necessary, and challenging, given the fact that the two "visions" were quite different. At Snowdon, unlike the Saint-Laurent program, the four English courses were structured and sequential. At Saint-Laurent, the English department offered more courses that were in keeping with the teachers' individual areas of interest and expertise. Furthermore, the student body was now much more diverse, indicating that the Snowdon "pedagogy" was no longer quite so relevant to students who were no longer almost exclusively first-language English speakers.

By the mid-1990s, significant changes in the Ministerial objectives rendered all this moot. The objectives were now competency-based

and the English program was overhauled quite dramatically. Our *Introduction to College English* (603-101) became a one-semester course (albeit with different levels to respond to the different language skills of our incoming students), with our 102, 103, and B Block courses clearly dedicated to genres, themes, and forms of discourse appropriate to one or more fields of study, respectively.

In a sense, every change in direction poses different challenges. As educators at Vanier, we have had to examine and re-examine our teaching methods in order to create pedagogical approaches and resources that are effective and empowering for a student body that is linguistically and culturally diverse. And all this must be done with a careful and conscientious view to the Ministerial competencies. Given all these demands, it is sometimes easy to overlook the fact that the incredible diversity of our students is actually our greatest resource!

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, I became very much aware of this. In fact, I experienced something that was transformational and incredibly energizing. I was teaching a 102-level literary genre course that I called *Hallmark of Success: The Adaptive and Adapting Short Story*. In keeping with the ministerial objectives, I would lead the students through the evolution of the short story genre, identifying its characteristic features. Naturally, I included the masters like de Maupassant, Poe, and London, while moving toward more contemporary international short story writers. And that is when I experienced my Eureka moment!

We were analysing the short story *Two Kinds* by Amy Tan, a writer who is often considered to be a major voice of the Chinese immigrant experience. A young lady in my class, who had been extremely solid in her work but not particularly involved in class discussions, blurted out "This is *my* story." A young man behind her, from another ethnic/religious background, then affirmed "it is *my* story too..." And so it went, up and down the rows, with students who had barely acknowledged each other, finding and responding to the common human challenges evoked in the literary work. What made this moment so significant for me was that I realized that literary works "outside" the common accepted "canon" of the great traditional Western masters were so much more important, so much more real and relevant to my students.

My teaching has never been the same since that class. I went home that day thinking about what had happened. I began to realize in a much more conscious way that the most incredible pedagogical resource we have at Vanier is actually the rich, complex diversity of our students. And I wanted to teach in such a way that would *involve*



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them and *empower* them as never before! I revamped this course, all the while teaching to the Ministerial competencies. I reflected upon the literary materials that I had included up till that point and decided to choose different works. Simply put: I rolled the DICE. In other words, I adopted a new template, a new method by which to determine whether or not we would study a given literary work. The literature now had to conform to what I called my DICE, a template that simply popped into my head as I was driving home that afternoon. In other words, the works had to be

- D ... dynamic, oriented toward the demographics
- I ..... international, so that the students would feel included
- C.... material that would foster collaboration and co-operation
- E .... material that would be empowering

The energy level and enthusiasm of the class went through the roof! In fact, the sense of involvement and empowerment on the part of the students in that class and in subsequent groups of my *Hallmark* short story class was palpable.

I can provide many anecdotal examples to prove how students have transformed into much more active, engaged, invested learners as a result of the pedagogical modifications that I brought to this course. I will restrict myself to one. As a final assignment, I allow students to choose between a 20% final exam or the submission of a 20% creative short story, which must demonstrate an appreciation and awareness of the generic features of the short story that they have learned throughout the semester. In the first years of this course, the vast majority of students opted for the final exam. This was, after all, their comfort zone. With an average class size of about 42, thirty-eight would write the exam and perhaps four would submit a short story. However, with the pedagogical and curriculum modifications, the reverse is now true. The vast majority of students opt to

submit a creative work of their own. Moreover, they talk to me of their desire to share their personal histories, to explore the challenges they face as college students in Quebec, often as the first members of their families to have the experience of being in schools where they are meeting and interacting with students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Additionally, statistical evidence provided by the Registrar demonstrates that invested, empowered students work harder and achieve better results. I wanted to see how my pedagogical and curriculum modifications affected the grades in the course and the numbers speak for themselves. From 2003 to 2017, the grade averages for *Hallmark of Success: the Adaptive and Adapting Short Story* steadily progressed from 75.7 to 83.5 with similar cohorts of students drawn from different programs of study.

Finally, ridding myself of the old paradigm, the old pedagogical approach – “I give you English literature from Beowulf to Beckett” – has changed me as an educator. I no longer see myself as someone to transmit body of knowledge X, but rather as a facilitator who teaches certain skills that will mobilize the potential of our students, and will help them to articulate and to communicate their tremendous diversity and rich, varied perceptions. For me, learning to adapt my pedagogy to respond to Vanier’s multilingual, multicultural student population has been exciting and personally rewarding.



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