Nimble thinking and a gaggle of unknowns

DOUG PEERS, Dean of Arts

THE SECOND ISSUE OF Inside Arts has prompted me to engage in some navel gazing (sorry folks, puns on the orange theme seem to come naturally – must be the mandarin in me). March is an interesting month (in the Confucian sense) on Canadian campuses. Spring is in sight as we prepare for final exams, yet there remains the possibility of another snow dump, not to mention the piles of grading that tend to accumulate this time of year. It is also the time for tenure and promotion committees, annual performance reviews, and budget building.

And for some faculty, it is a time when they are anxiously awaiting the results of external grant submissions, a situation similar in many respects to our students looking for news about summer job prospects. Not surprisingly, this means that there are signs of fatigue and anxiety within the ring road, a situation that unfortunately is not eased by the appearance of that other great harbinger of springtime on campus – gangs of grumpy geese striding across the campus, loudly proclaiming their turf, and whose disdain for us (and attendant modes of articulation) seems at times to parallel the attacks by some of our other critics.
And while I never thought I would find myself quoting Donald Rumsfeld, his hierarchy of ‘known knowns’, ‘known unknowns’, and ‘unknown unknowns’ has proven to be a helpful way of navigating across the ever-changing landscape of higher education. If defending the values of a liberal arts education has been a ‘known known’ for some time, and if as usual the levels of financial support from the federal and provincial governments are often a ‘known unknown’ until the very last moment, the biggest ‘unknown unknown’ to me is where Ontario is going with regards to undergraduate education.

The world of higher education in Ontario is in flux, and not only because of the economic downturn of 2007/8. Five years ago, when I arrived in Ontario, the talk was mainly about research and graduate education – so much so that academics and administrators in other jurisdictions were quite jealous. Universities, at least to many outside observers, increasingly appeared to be preoccupied with growing their graduate programs and increasing their research output, all within the context of an increasingly globalized higher education market. Research and graduate education were two of the key elements underpinning the Reaching Higher agenda, and on the federal level, a similar commitment to research capacity building manifested itself with the launch of the CGS and Vanier fellowship schemes. The government has gone rather quiet on the subject of graduate education, and federally there is talk of substantial cuts to the research councils. Undergraduate education has emerged as a hot topic. Witness the Drummond Report – what I found most interesting in it is that on several occasions he suggests, and not always that subtly, that money intended for teaching has been siphoned off for research. There have been some other interesting signals such as talk of paralleling the Bologna process, suggestions that Ontario should impose greater differentiation between universities, and the idea of teaching-only universities has been launched as a trial balloon. These discussions are not confined to Ontario. No wonder then that there has been a proliferation of books on the state of higher education, prompting an article in the recent Chronicle of Higher Education which forecasts the rise of yet another discipline: ‘critical higher education studies’.

But it is not like we forgot about undergraduate education – having just gone through the annual performance review exercise, there is no question in my mind that we are a faculty that is deeply engaged in and committed to the quality of our undergraduate programming. Being the Dean of a Faculty with so many excellent teachers is quite a humbling experience. Moreover, it is clear that many of our colleagues are constantly looking at ways of more effectively and creatively engaging with students. And we don’t treat teaching in isolation – teaching and research are what define a university, and we are doing both very well in this Faculty. I look forward to launching soon a series of awards for teaching, research and service, open to faculty, staff and students, as a way of acknowledging the excellence which resides within Arts.

So, why then am I so preoccupied with thoughts of belligerent geese, or a late spring dump of snow? It seems to me that the biggest challenge before us is in getting our story known – not only the story of a Faculty with great depth and breadth, of excellent researchers and superb teachers (hence the awards we will soon be announcing), but also the story of how an education in the ‘Arts’, broadly defined, is ideally suited to dealing with the ‘unknown unknowns’ as well as the ‘known unknowns’. This can be directly attributed to the emphasis we place on developing skills in research, analysis and communications, and the sensitivity we encourage to community, place and time. One outcome of the Strategic Planning Exercise is that collectively, we as a Faculty, will have an answer to the questions ‘Why Arts? Why Waterloo?’ Based on the discussions I have had to date with our faculty, staff, and students as well as the conversations initiated by the Strategic Plan Task Force, I am confident that we will have answers that does justice to our rich heritage while also providing a platform for further developing and enriching our curriculum.

Now if we can only figure out those geese....
Our undergrads keeping-on

March Break Open House redesign
Thanks to support from the Dean of Arts, and in concert with Marketing and Undergraduate Recruitment, March Break Open House will showcase an exciting new visual experience for our visitors this week. As our most critical recruitment event, the Open House welcomes our prospective students, many with offers in their hands, and their families to campus over two days to visit the six faculties. Arts’ main day is Wednesday March 14, shared with the faculties of Applied Health Sciences and Science. We’ll have newly designed information booths in both the PAC and the SAF atrium on our ‘off’ day to meet the needs of anyone who can’t be here on the Wednesday. Our approach will promote greater movement between the Arts buildings on campus, and will visually unite and professionalize our department displays and discipline page handouts. As always, the success of Open House will be due in large part to the terrific contributions of faculty and staff.

Meeting admission targets
While 2011/2012 admissions fell just below targets, Arts has exceeded its targets in all years between 2007-08 and 2010-11. This has been achieved in spite of an increase in the entry admission averages in Honours Arts, Honours Arts & Business, and Social Development Studies. Currently, Honours Arts makes offers only to students with a 79% average. Progress so far suggests that while the number of applications to Honours Arts may be lower, the quality of applicant is higher – meaning, we are making about the same number of offers as in the past few years.

Meeting and exceeding targets has involved a concerted effort on the part of many in the faculty, including the Recruitment team, the AUNO and the Dean’s Office, and, of course, the departments. Strategies include:

» Publications: a new brochure and approach was developed for Honours Arts this year (the ‘Originals Wanted’ campaign)
» Off-campus events such as the Ontario Universities Fair (with an outstanding Waterloo booth)
» On-campus events such as the Fall Open House and especially the March Break Open House
» Special presentations and other outreach efforts

Most critical are the communication strategies to translate offers of admission into confirmed incoming students. Department support for these efforts is an important part of our success.

Where they come from, where they go
It may surprise some to know that as many first year students come to us from the Toronto region as from the KW region. Our main competition, however, is not surprising: U of T, Western, WLU, Guelph, McMaster (in no particular order). While these universities may change position on the list of top 5, they have pretty consistently comprised our competition over the years. The Honours Arts brochure project was attempting, among other aims, to better segment out that audience (from Arts and Business and our other Arts entry programs).

Co-op continues to work
Co-op remains an important educational component in the Faculty of Arts; it enables us to attract quality students who go on to pursue further studies and rewarding careers. Despite a slowing economy in some years, Arts co-op employment consistently settled in the upper ninety percentile in all three terms; a testimony to the academic preparation and versatility of our students.
Deeper learning coming to a classroom near you

For several months in 2011, I was part of the Task Force on Innovative Teaching Practices to Promote Deep Learning at the University of Waterloo, chaired by Donna Ellis of Centre for Teaching Excellence. The Task Force’s report has been released and is available for download from the CTE website. Its recommendations are under discussion in various venues and at various levels across campus, and some are already being implemented. For example, each Faculty is now exploring the creation of Teaching Fellow positions. These positions are broadly intended to promote an ongoing focus on teaching excellence within the Faculties, by awarding Fellowships to faculty members with strong teaching and mentoring skills to act as teaching resource people. Arts has convened a committee to set the terms of Teaching Fellowships in our Faculty. The committee will be having its first meeting as this newsletter goes to press.

Of course the title of the task force sounds: impressive; daunting; crazed; baffling (pick, oh, any two). But before blaming the Provost for choosing the title, you should note that the idea is actually pretty straightforward. “Deep learning” more or less means “learning”, but the phrase is worth using to distinguish real learning from the data-dump approach that is often used (and sometimes rewarded) in university courses. Students sometimes lose course skills and information very quickly after writing the final exam, so that they largely fail to recall or apply the course material within just a few months.

If this happens, then they didn’t really learn the material in the rich sense that we arguably ought to be shooting for – whether or not they got a good mark in the course.

In this context, “innovative” means new in the same sense that all my cars have ever been new – that is, new to me. So the bottom line is this: How can the university, specific academic units, and individual instructors gather and master new-to-them teaching approaches that will help students learn material in ways that will maximize their retention and the application of skills in many different contexts? (See? The report’s actual title is shorter!)

While there are lots of great teachers at the University of Waterloo, there are also many instructors (of every degree of experience and accomplishment) who want to be better still. But they will rarely be aware of the range of other possible approaches to teaching their material. And, being busy folks with expertise in their own disciplines rather than in the field of pedagogy itself, they will typically lack the time or expertise to seek out alternative approaches. I’m certainly in that boat. So it’s not very plausible to suppose that an ethos of continuous improvement in our teaching can just be left for individual instructors or departments to sort out. We need to develop institutional pathways to share teaching techniques. And we need to build into our working conditions the incentives and the time to learn and implement those techniques.

Through serving on the Task Force I learned a great deal about teaching, and about the creativity of instructors across the Faculty of Arts and the University. There are astonishing reservoirs of teaching genius all over this campus; this experience allowed me the privilege of seeing them. I do hope everyone will give the report at least a quick read, and share whatever feedback they might have about its recommendations. We need a conversation about where we see teaching excellence fitting into our institutional priorities. And with strategic plans for all Faculties in the works, we have a pretty good opportunity to shift university practices right now.
The internationalized university

Faculty, staff, and students in Arts are all players in the process that's come to be called 'internationalization' – one of UWaterloo's foundational pillars (see Mid-cycle Review). This month, the faculties of Arts and Mathematics joined forces to bring to campus an expert in teaching and supporting international students (IS). Janette Ryan is a scholar in international education practice based at Oxford University who leads several major applied research initiatives dedicated to improving the IS experience for all participants, but especially the students. During her three days on campus, Dr. Ryan gave an open presentation, Teaching in internationalised classrooms: Challenges and opportunities (slides available from Bill Chesney) and numerous consultation sessions with specific units connected to Arts or Math.

Developing a two-way exchange

Originally from Australia, Dr. Ryan was herself an international student in China (“it was a huge adventure”) and today speaks fluent Mandarin. She understands the IS experience from all perspectives. Among many points shared during her visit to campus, Dr. Ryan stresses that successful internationalization needs to be a two-way and holistic venture. By describing it as two-way, she means all sides (visitor and host) should invest and benefit, and that two-way IS traffic between countries is crucial. She suggests that host universities should take a holistic approach by sustaining IS support from pre-arrival to graduation. While many western institutions are very good at the ‘big welcome’, they fail to follow through with ongoing awareness of, and response to, the challenges facing foreign students. The term ‘holistic’ also refers to keeping the IS among the general student cohort, rather than pulling them off to separate tutorial sessions. Bruce Muirhead (Assoc. Dean, Graduate Studies and Research) notes from Dr. Ryan’s presentation, “the domestic cohort is the international student’s new home and to remove them from it almost guarantees failure.”

Understanding the shock factors

If internationalization is defined as an equal exchange of culture, values and understanding, Dr. Ryan suggests we need to work to recognize the other’s perspective. In particular, it’s essential for host faculty, staff, and students to appreciate that many newly arrived foreign students face language shock, culture shock, and academic shock. Drawing from her area of cultural specialization, she explains, “Chinese and western ways of teaching and learning seem like opposites; but they are different approaches to the same end.” She illustrated the apparent opposites in her slide presentation with a chart juxtaposing Chinese and western learning habits, including these (respectively): ‘consensus /avoiding conflict vs. argumentation/assertiveness’; ‘reflective learners vs. deep learners seeking meaning’; and ‘critique of the self vs. critique of the other’.

Moving forward

Reflecting on Janette Ryan’s visit, Bill Chesney (Assoc. Dean, Undergraduate Studies) commented that he hopes Arts (professors, staff, and students) will develop a “better understanding of the challenges international students face... and perhaps we can find more ways to effectively utilize existing resources for integrating them in the classrooms and other aspects of student life.”

Find resources and information on Janette Ryan’s project website ‘Teaching International Students’
Bloggers in Arts

For some, the blog provides a new and electronic platform for op-ed commentary. For others, the blog post becomes a new genre in itself: an interactive, hyperlinked forum for more informal reflection on research questions and professional concerns. However it is used, the blog is definitely gaining ground in Arts, particularly in the Department of English Language & Literature. Here are some of the blogs – and bloggers – to be found in the Faculty of Arts.

**Words in Place** » A blog for all members, past and present, of the Waterloo’s Department of English Language & Literature.

**Critical Media Lab** » Explorations of the impact of technology on the human condition.

**Myth of the Steersman** » A blog documenting Myth of the Steersman, an installation by Marcel O’Gorman designed for an exhibition called “Searching for Tom,” curated by Virginia Eichhorn of the Tom Thomson Art Gallery.

**Lady English Professor** » Linda Warley, English
On being an English professor: “My working life happens sometimes at the university, but always in my head and mostly in front of some sort of computing device…”

**digiwonk** » Aimee Morrison, English
Digital culture, new media design, social media, and big ideas … about little things.

**Hook & Eye** » Aimee Morrison, English (with others)
The realities of being women working in the Canadian university system.

**BITS: Ideas for Teaching Composition** »
Jay Dolmage, English (with others)
Advice from his book, *How to Write Anything*.

**Bessma Momani (Huffington Post Canada)** »
Bessma Momani, Political Science
Thoughts on the IMF, international economics, and politics in the Middle East.

**Andrew Cooper (Huffington Post Canada)** »
Andrew Cooper, Political Science
Thoughts on world politics, international diplomacy, and the G20.

**Dispatches from the Field** » Mark Sedra, Political Science
Perspectives on the Afghanistan conflict.

**Regarding Self-Regard (Psychology Today)** »
Joanne Wood, Psychology
The highs and lows of self-esteem.

**Where Am I?** » Colin Ellard, Psychology
Musings on the psychology of space, navigation, and design.

**Hot Thought (Psychology Today)** » Paul Thagard, Philosophy
Psychology meets philosophy: knowledge, reality, morality, meaning.
The Worriers shoot, score... and lose with panache

The University of Waterloo Worriers, a staff/faculty team, took to the ice to face off against five other university hockey powerhouses in the tournament organized by the Guelph Old Gryphons during Reading Week. The Worriers entered the tournament squarely in every team’s sights, as the tournament winners of 2011 and all-time leaders in tournament wins. In this unfriendly setting, the team acquitted itself well – at least for the first 80 percent of every game played. Against Nippissing, the Worriers were victimized by officiating with 28 seconds left, after Bruce Muirhead rocketed a shot off Tim Kenyon and into the net, seemingly for the win.

After the game ended in a tie, the referee was last seen earnestly explaining to a stack of chairs that he had lost sight of the puck. Against both McMaster and Western, 2-goal leads disappeared as injuries to younger players meant that the Worriers temporarily suffered from a shortage of players and a surplus of experience. Our leading scorer hurt his back getting up from the breakfast table (yes, really) two hours before our grudge match with Guelph, while Bill Eickmeier, our top line centre, was sidelined with a broken finger. Strep throat and a business trip to Australia accounted for two other players. Priorities, please!

“Despite our record,” asserts Muirhead, “we won the panache and flamboyance award that made the Worriers the envy of all other teams. We dressed better, we strutted better and we certainly spoke better.” But that is the “Waterloo Way!” The team feels confident that it can return to the champion’s podium next year, allowing uWaterloo to retake the lead in overall tournament wins.
Reminders

On the Arts homepage you'll find the link to the Strategic Planning web pages where you can check the schedule of consultation meetings, review relevant data and updates, and, most important, send your thoughts and ideas to the Strategic Planning Task Force.

Also on the Arts homepage, you'll find a link to the Waterloo-Congress 2012 portal. Watch this site in the coming weeks and months for more information and features about this huge event co-hosted by uWaterloo and WLU, May 26 - June 2.

Have a decent camera and an eye for interesting photos?

Pitch

Submit your campus photos
» student life, wildlife, classroom action, research action, buildings, public art, curiosities. The Dean promises prizes for photos selected for the Faculty of Arts web pages.

Send submissions to wphilpott@uwaterloo.ca.

Feedback, please

We will publish five issues of Inside Arts per year: two in Fall term, two in Winter term, and one in Spring/Summer term. Send your comments and ideas to wphilpott@uwaterloo.ca.