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February 10, 2006

A is for Admissions

by Alan MacEachern

I was reading James M. Lang's *Life on the Tenure Track: Lessons from the First Year* (Johns Hopkins, 2005) when it dawned on me. The book, tracing the author's first year teaching English at a liberal arts college in Massachusetts, is a splendid little guide for those starting their first academic job or for grad students considering such a career. It tells of struggling to find the balance that will allow him to prepare, teach, write, serve, grade, fit in, and have a life all at once.

What impresses is not so much Professor Lang's advice, which veers from the excellent (keep your mouth shut and your ears open for the first year of departmental meetings) to the very questionable (call in and cancel your classes sometime just to give yourself a "mental checkout day"), but rather his guileless, mortifying honesty. He tells of grading too easy because he wanted his students to like him. He calls the students in the English club "dorks." He fantasizes about lecturing his class about student evaluations, "And this is your opportunity to validate me as a teacher, to tell me how great I am. . . ." He admits volunteering for his department's appointments committee in part to gain grist for his column in *The Chronicle for Higher Education.*

Professor Lang's book sprang from that column, and I had come to the book for pointers because I was beginning a column for *University Affairs*. This column, in fact. And so it dawned on me: if I was going to write 26 columns about academic life, I would have to be honest. And not just about my students and colleagues - it's easy to be honest about other people. (For example, some of my colleagues are dorks.) But about myself.

In one sense, talking honestly about oneself is something of an occupational hazard for all professors, like being chatty, like explaining everything in a couple of ways so the listener gets it (as in this sentence). We use our ideas and experiences all the time when talking to students. But in another sense, we're also constantly self-editing, careful to say only what is useful, appropriate, and - most censorious of all - smart. I think of Professor Allan Gedalof's description of teaching as an opportunity to present "an impersonation of your better self." And, of course, that's one of the things to love about teaching: it demands you be a better person than you might be otherwise, and maybe it helps make you so.

But writing a column is not teaching; here, true honesty must reign. In that spirit, I'll get some academic admissions out of the way:

- During particularly dry committee meetings, I've been known to wrinkle my brow, nod thoughtfully, and scribble down Bob Dylan lyrics. I don't know why.
- Though it's on my CV, I may not have had a postdoc. I thought I did; McGill History, which hosted me, thought I did; and SSHRC, which paid me, certainly thought I did. But when I arrived in Montreal, the chair of the day smiled and said, "McGill expects nothing of you, and neither should you expect anything of McGill." So I moved to Ottawa and researched and wrote in the National Archives for two years. In the second year, McGill instructed me to come to Montreal with my doctoral diploma in hand (no copies, please) to register as a postdoctoral fellow. But the diploma looked so nice on the wall. For all I know, McGill still has no record of me.
- I've been a contract faculty member, but in one respect I just don't feel the solidarity I'm supposed to feel for my contract brethren: I don't think universities are obliged to help limited-term positions become permanent. If the university wants to solidify its staffing (as with spousal hires) then by all means do so, but I see no moral obligation to do so. My reasoning is autobiographical, I'll admit: I'm from PEI and would love to be living near water, but London, Ontario, was where the job was, so here I am. Why should someone else teach in the city of their choice and gain the same rank as me, not by virtue of a search but by staying power?

Well, that felt good, cathartic. Maybe M will stand for More Admissions, S for Still More Admissions

***Alan MacEachern is director of the Public History program at the University of Western Ontario and a new, regular columnist for* University Affairs.**

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March 10, 2006

B is for Books

by Alan MacEachern

I once knew a professor who liked books. He read one a day, it was said, every day of his adult life. His office was filled with the things, as you can imagine, to the point that he had floor-to-ceiling bookcases built throughout, including just inside the door. Visitors stepped across the threshold, shuffled to the left, squeezed forward, and shuffled to the right, to find him waiting like a hedgehog in a den. Perhaps students dropped a trail of paperbacks along the way, to help find their way back, I don't know.

Walk down the corridor of any university building, peeking in the offices, and you will see that professors (and grad students, for that matter) love their books. They also love mess, yellowing Doonesbury cartoons, travel mugs, and dying plants, but mostly books. Books piled two-deep, as if for their R-value. Thick books signifying a discipline disciplined. Thin books, a second thought, a moment of weakness. Books with bookmarks, Post-it Notes, annotations, highlighting, index cards, and dog ears. Books inscribed by colleagues, never to be read. Books carried from city to city, position to position, since grad school, in the hopes of finally sitting just as they are in a more permanent home. Books organized, but usually only enough to suggest a preference for disorganization, like a hotel bed partially remade.

We like to say we need these books close at hand, for both research and teaching purposes. What if I need advice on displaying visual information, and Edward Tufte isn't close at hand? What if a grad student disagrees with me on the discursive effect of "sic" and I can't turn to novelist James Kelman writing, "Naw, but what they done, just to show me who was boss, one of the qualities DID publish my letter. But see I had made a bloomer, I spelt 'victimising' wrong. . . . So they just left it in. And then they done an insert, the buggars, they stuck a wee SIC beside it. That was all they done. So easy! . . . Ye pay a lot of dough for a lesson like that on the outside." (Sic.)

What if one of my students asks about the King-Byng affair, and, as often happens, all I can remember is that this isn't a reference to Billie Jean King versus Bobby Riggs? Well, life would go on. And, of course, I could always fall back on the web. (Stay tuned for "G is for Google".)

But we also argue that our books serve an important rhetorical function. They tell students the importance we place on learning, and the importance they should place on it, too. We're a university, we deal in books, or rather the stuff in books. This has the advantage of being true, but it is only part of the truth. Books also serve the rhetorical function of telling visitors that I know a lot about a few topics - presumably the topics they are likely to come talk to me about. The books are to remind me of that, too. I have shelves and shelves of the little soldiers, standing at attention, ready to protect their owner from whatever force might darken my doorway.

I think it is worthwhile to consider how our offices may intimidate students. And so I am planning to draw attention to the whole issue, by transforming my office explicitly into a conceptual space. I may turn all the spines inward, shielding visitors from whatever I've been reading. Or I may offer one book to each visitor - watching with interest as their eyes graze over titles and interpreting the significance of their eventual choice - until every book is gone. Or I may move my books to storage, buy up the 800 remaining copies of my own two authored books, and shelve these instead. Or I may stack books like sandbags across the middle of my office, building a foxhole to protect my intellectual position.

At the moment, I am most interested in carpeting my office floor with six inches of books, to remind myself and others of universities' long intellectual tradition. If we see further now, it is by standing on the shoulders - and spines - of giants.

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April 10, 2006

C is for Class size

by Alan MacEachern

Every year, come September, come January, faculty meet in hallways, asking, "How's it going, what's new - how many you got?" We think about students as people first, really we do, but at that one time in the term, they are also numbers. There's embarrassment, concern, and perhaps relief in saying, "I only have nine in my fourth-year course." There's anger, concern, and perhaps pride in saying, "Four hundred! Can you believe it?" Class size speaks to the state of modern university education, to faculty's workload in relation to our peers, our individual workload, and even our sense of worth - of whether we are teaching the right stuff and whether we reached last year's students enough that they encouraged their friends towards our courses or warned them away.

One of my old professors was in the headlines recently, rebelling against swelling class sizes. David Weale, a retired history professor at the University of Prince Edward Island teaching a course on contract, was suspended in January for offering students in an overcrowded classroom a mark of 70 percent as long as they never returned to class. The "Weale deal" captured national attention and was all the talk of Prince Edward Island for weeks, I hear*, until the UPEI student newspaper reprinted Danish caricatures of the prophet Mohammed.

Winters on the Island are long and cold, you see. You've got to keep busy.

My Ontario colleagues tended to focus on Professor Weale's concern that the class had 95 students ("95! That's nothing!"). They wrote him off as an eccentric, a scammer, or both. I tried to impress on them that he was much more than that. He has been an excellent, popular, committed educator for 30 years, and also a public figure. One of his books on oral history, *Them Times*, has sold close to 20,000 copies. His children's book *The True Meaning of Crumbfest* has become a Christmastime staple of CBC Radio, and launched a TV cartoon series. He was also a reader on my undergraduate thesis, and asked by far the most probing and insightful questions.

When caught offering a B- for non-attendance, Professor Weale claimed that his action was a form of protest against a system that stuffs 95 students into a lecture room, spilling into the aisles and taking notes on their knees. More than that, it was a protest against the notion that Canadian universities define success in terms of attracting more and more students. And it was a protest against the notion that most 22-year-olds are best served with an undergraduate degree. Dr. Weale argued that there were many students in university who simply didn't want to learn, that such students graduated with credentials and a heavy debt load, but little of an education. He told the *Globe and Mail* that the deal he offered students of the religious history course was an act of "grace", and that they would learn something important about life by accepting it: that we don't live in a perfect meritocracy, that luck - such as what family you're born into - plays a big part in how you'll do in life.

Dr. Weale's reasoning is disappointing, on a number of fronts. How would giving students a free pass do anything but further weaken what he sees as an already devalued university education? How would his actions have constituted a protest if students hadn't complained to administration and the media? And what life lesson was learned by those students who were willing to reject his grace in favour of the education they paid for, and who presumably risked failure as a result?

But even accepting Dr. Weale's arguments about an out-of-control system, one can imagine him taking more appropriate actions. Why didn't he make the course assignments tougher, to scare off students who really didn't want to learn? For that matter, why didn't he promise a 70 percent to students who attended every class, and - I don't know - try to educate them?

To me, the oddest thing about the whole issue was the media's response. The CBC, *Globe and Mail*, and Charlottetown *Guardian* never noted that the Weale deal would have not only made some students' lives easier, but the professor's as well. David Weale was doing his own marking for this course, so fewer students meant less marking. That the media missed this obvious, cynical rationale for his actions suggests one of two things: either Canadians still have an idealistic view of university professors or they have absolutely no conception of how much work goes into grading students' assignments, and therefore how greatly class size affects what we do.

** My mother, proud of her son and his little column (maybe I should rephrase that), has taken to sending me clippings on university matters. P is for Parental Research Assistants.*

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May 2006 • Academic alphabet www.universityaffairs.ca

D is for Doctorate

by Alan MacEachern

The *University Affairs* style manual (ok, it's not a manual, it's more like a Post-it, mostly advising contributors not to use words like "aspect", "scenario", or "ivory tower grunt monkeys") recommends that if you don't know whether a professor has a doctorate or not, call her "Professor"; if you learn she does, call her "Dr." I find this odd, because "Professor" strikes me as more of an honorific than "Dr." nowadays, and one not to be lost for possessing a doctorate. The rule may have made sense when many professors didn't have the PhD, but today it seems that everybody and their dog have one.

I'll admit, my demographics may be skewed. Everybody and their dog are somewhat left-of-centre middle-agers who appreciate Shiraz and organic produce, right?

Reading Michael T. Nettles and Catherine M. Millett's *Three Magic Letters: Getting to Ph.D.* (Johns Hopkins, 2006) has gotten me thinking about the doctorate and its value. The authors surveyed more than 9,000 doctoral students from 21 American graduate schools over five years – the largest such survey ever conducted. Students were asked as they made their way through their programs about enrolment, financing, "socialization", interactions with faculty and other students, future plans, and much more. As might be expected, the authors' conclusions from all this data are many and varied, differentiated by discipline, gender and ethnicity, and always cautious. Among their findings, some surprising and some not:

• Research productivity (measured by such things as publications and conference presentations) proved to be a good predictor of degree completion, and did not correspond to a longer time to completion.

• Student financing, on the other hand, proved to be a weak predictor of time to completion.

• Teaching assistantships did not seem to slow students' rate of progress or completion.

• Students are less enchanted with faculty the longer they are enrolled.

The book is impressive for not merely telling you what doctoral students are thinking (45 percent think they're in the top 25 percent of their class) but in relating what they are thinking to how they are doing – mentally, financially, socially and professionally.

I was struck by one finding in particular. Students were asked whether they had a mentor, a faculty member to whom they "turn for advice, to review a paper, or for general support and encouragement." The question did not preclude a mentor also being the doctoral supervisor. Yet only 69 percent of the students said they had found a mentor; the number is especially troubling because the investigators found that having one was highly predictive of research productivity, itself predictive of doctoral success.

That almost one-third of students polled could not name a mentor is a disgrace.

As in the United States, in Canada the number of PhDs enrolled is rapidly on the rise: from 24,890 in 2001-02 to 30,393 in 2003-04, according to the CAUT Almanac. I see this increase in my own field of history, and even in my own department. The pressures are from everywhere: provinces want universities to do more research; administrators want graduate program growth (particularly when each doctoral student is "worth" much more in funding than each undergraduate); departments and professors want to show their relative vigor and popularity; and there are simply more students wanting in.

Yet – and I can't believe I'm about to make such a young fogey comment – some PhD candidates we see do not arrive as well-trained as they once were. I am not blaming high school teachers, the Internet or fluoride. Universities are trying to get graduate students in and out faster, and one result is that many master's programs have moved from two years to one. My MA was a 190-page thesis (and I walked 10 miles to school); most Canadian graduate programs in history today have dropped the MA thesis, in favour of an essay of 50 pages or so. For some doctoral students, that is insufficient preparation.

So we have more doctoral students, many with even more need of our mentoring. Regardless of our busy lives, regardless of pressures to "grow" programs, regardless of how much we think PhD students gain by being thrown into the deep end to work things out for themselves, doctoral supervisors need to see mentoring every one of their students as a principal responsibility. These students invest a half-dozen years or so in us, and they deserve to know that there is at least one person they can rely on through what can be a very isolating time of life. The result will be better students, a more valuable doctorate and, since future universities will themselves be staffed by these graduates, a stronger Canadian postsecondary system.

Otherwise, we're creating a scenario one aspect of which is the rise of ivory tower grunt monkeys.

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June/July 2006 www.universityaffairs.ca

E is for Equity

by Alan MacEachern

The first review of my first column: a grad student passing in the hallway asks, "What have you got against adjuncts?"

Sigh. I had called my colleagues dorks and committed some other minor transgressions, but I knew what would stick was my questioning whether universities were obliged to help limited-term hires become permanent. Faculty don't tend to talk to one another about university policies on sessional work, and I hoped to start a conversation.

I didn't know that *University Affairs* would also run an opinion piece entitled "The Plight of Canada's Contractual Professors" which concluded, "What it all comes down to is this: in Canada we have one class of professors denying another class of professors respect, job security, vocational dignity, the recognition they've earned and the income they deserve."

I wondered if this was true. By virtue of being a tenure-track faculty, was I part of the problem? I called Joe Berry, author of *Reclaiming the Ivory Tower: Organizing Adjuncts to Change Higher Education* (2005). His book (and website, reclaimingtheivorytower.org) provides an excellent analysis of contingent faculty's situation in the United States as well as advice for change.

Me: Do you agree with that quote? Is the relationship between contingent faculty and those you call FTTTs (full-time tenure- track faculty) us vs. them?

JB: I don't see it that way. I see all faculty as fundamentally on the same side and with the same interests in the long run – and usually in the short run. But when asked to speak to contingent/FTTT relations, the first thing I always say is: that's not the main issue confronting us... The main thing is we've got to organize ourselves, and get up our collective courage, and then people can ally with us.

Me: So what should the role be of full-time tenure-track faculty?

JB: First, adopt an attitude of equity, equality, solidarity among equals – and that's really hard. The other thing is to recognize that there's a lot about our lives that you don't know or understand, because we can't afford to speak honestly to you. And have a little humility for what we're working to accomplish. In every mixed meeting of FTTTs and contingents I've ever been in, the FTTTs talk way more than their numbers would warrant. And those are the most sympathetic! The others aren't even in the conversation!

Me: You follow the Canadian situation, I know. Do you see our contingent faculty situation as similar to the United States?

JB: The big difference in Canada is that the majority of people are unionized, and a substantial percentage in combined bargaining units with tenure-track faculty, and that has made a substantial difference in pay and conditions. And, of course, everybody has health care. But there's tremendous variation from province to province. What people have achieved in some schools in B.C. virtually approach equity, and are probably the best in North America: much

improved job security, and preference for more work, and a degree of pay equity.

Me: You don't like the word "adjunct" but it's the one used in your book's subtitle.

JB: Unfortunately, it's the word most commonly used for contingent faculty. But it's inaccurate. For better or worse, we're the majority of faculty in U.S. higher education. There are more of us in North America than there are steelworkers. Than autoworkers. People have got to see the economy as it exists today not with rose-coloured glasses, as an "information age," but with a real sense of what the new economy looks like, which is heavily casualized. Including people with the most advanced degrees. Most of the labour movement hasn't adjusted to that yet, but that's another part of deindustrialization and nobody's better able to draw attention to that than us.

Me: What's the contingent faculty movement's goal?

JB: For me, it's to destroy contingency. That doesn't mean you destroy people's flexibility, or their ability to work part-time, or to change their status in the labour force, but that the choice should be made largely by the person doing the work and not imposed upon them. And if posed that way, you get very few arguments – especially from anyone who's on the receiving end of the education system. Who wants to be taught by someone not free to tell the truth as they see it? We're not just fighting to improve our situation for ourselves; we're also fighting for the conditions necessary to provide our services at a higher level. I have met no contingent activists who don't talk – relentlessly – about how existing conditions keep us from doing our best work educationally. Without exception. Because people don't get into this profession or stay in this profession to make money.

Me: I think I've filled my column, Joe, but do you want to keep talking?

JB: Sure.

P.S. The topic will have its biggest discussion by contingents themselves Aug. 10-13, in Vancouver, when the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor holds its biennial conference at Simon Fraser University. The conference webpage is www.caut.ca/cocal.

Alan MacEachern is director of the Public History program at the University of Western Ontario.

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F is for Faculty

by Alan MacEachern

When I was underemployed at the end of the millennium, one year from becoming either a history professor or a bartender who would tell you the history of bartending, it galled me that this magazine carried career ads telling me that, as a man, I shouldn't bother applying. The sins of the fathers were being visited upon me, I suppose, but my own father had a Grade 8 education and worked a small farm, so his role in sustaining patriarchy in Canadian universities always seemed quite limited. But a women friend assured me that if I were an academic earlier in the century, I too would have been part of the problem. It struck me as a failure of empathy that she could picture me back in time, but not herself as a man today.

My opinion on universities having hiring preferences has changed – and not, I hope, solely because I'm now comfortably ensconced in a university. Rather, I'm getting to see the product of hiring preferences, or at least the product of the desire to ensure women's access, regardless of whether or where such preferences became policy. The move toward gender parity is not merely fair, it is making for a more interesting and varied professoriate, and must make for a better education for our students – a majority of whom are female. I really can't imagine teaching in a largely or all-male department that even pretended it could examine the history of human experience.

Thoughts on this arose lately when reading two 2005 University of Toronto Press books. John G. Slater's *Minerva's Aviary* traces the history of the University of Toronto philosophy department. Dr. Slater, an emeritus and ex-chair of the department, has written a study that is engaging and, at almost 600 pages, exhaustive. A handy appendix lists everyone who has ever taught in the department, and by my count men outnumber women 10 to one. Moreover, one-third of all women who have ever taught philosophy at Toronto's main campus were hired since 1999. The index bears the forlorn entry "women faculty in philosophy, [pages] 459-61", and even this small section deals mostly with the department's decision in 1990 to seek women candidates actively when hiring. There is no discussion of the near-total absence of women professors before that. Perhaps one could argue that it is not the historian's job to tell why something didn't happen, but that's to ignore what did happen: men, men, and more men got hired for more than a century.

In contrast to Dr. Slater's book, consider historian Donald Wright's *The Professionalization of History* in English Canada. Dr. Wright devotes a full chapter to "The Importance of Being Sexist: The Masculinization of History," chronicling the experiences of women who attempted to enter the field. In all, three women historians landed full-time appointments in English Canada before 1960. Three! Just Margaret Ormsby, Hilda Neatby and Jean Murray – and Professor Murray, at the University of Saskatchewan, was daughter of the president, it should be said. More common were the experiences of women like Margaret Banks, who fought fruitlessly for an appointment through the entire 1950s before accepting a position of law librarian at the University of Western Ontario. More common still were the women who didn't make it through graduate school: only six of 41 women who began a history PhD at Toronto before 1960 ever completed it. And yet more common still were those who never made it to grad school, or never learned that they might have liked to be historians.

My own department has taken on 18 new faculty members since 2000, nine of whom are women. Put another way, in five years we have hired three times as many full-time female historians as

were hired in all Canadian universities for more than half of the 20th century. But there's no reason for smugness just yet. Just as we today look back in dismay at the gender demographics of universities of the past, we will surely look back in dismay at the racial demographics of the present. History, for one, is still an almost entirely white discipline in Canada. Of the 18 recent hires in my own department, five, or almost one-third, have names starting with "Mac".

Alan MacEachern is director of the Public History program at the University of Western Ontario.

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August 10, 2006

G is for Google

by Alan MacEachern

Sorry, grad students, grants, grammar, geography departments, grading and graduation gowns.

These are the Google years.

In early 1999, Walter Zimmerman, a reference librarian at Western, heard about a new Internet search engine called Google. When a student approached his desk wanting to find primary sources on the 1925 Scopes trial, he decided to try it. Presciently, he printed out and saved the results. When he typed in Scopes trial (no quotes), Google responded with "at least 2855 matches" in 2.62 seconds. Most impressively, whereas the results offered by other engines were somewhat hit-or-miss, the very first site Google listed was a University of Missouri law professor's compilation of Scopes trial-related documents - exactly what the student needed. Mr. Zimmerman quickly became such a fan of the search engine that his colleagues dubbed him "Mr. Google." And he bought shares. (Remarkably, he is still a reference librarian.) He asked his bosses if it was okay that he continued to endorse a product he owned a piece of.

"They said, Walter, you couldn't be more enthusiastic about Google if you owned the whole company," he laughs.

Google's ascension in the culture has been extraordinary. In just a few years it has become everybody's phone book, encyclopedia, atlas, reference library, private investigator and much more. It is accepted as a verb by Merriam-Webster. It is the fastest growing company in history, and seems to breed new tools like Zeitgeist, Picasa, Earth, Maps, Scholar and Checkout every week. It is even one of the largest manufacturers of computers, so that it can maintain more than a half-million networked servers humming along at any moment, running Linux and strung together with Velcro - like the Borg, without sound cards. I've so internalized Google that I can't immediately name any other search engines (is AltaVista still active?). So, of course, I Google "search engine."

Recreating the Scopes trial search today yields more than 1.4 million results in .16 seconds (with the Missouri professor's site still ranked first).

This is credit to the web's exponential growth, of course, but that too is partly thanks to Google.

In 1999 I wrote in this magazine that web material in my field had not expanded much in the previous couple of years: "we seem still to be largely relying on the first generation of Web users, and waiting for the next generation to create a much deeper Web." But by providing more helpful searches, Google suddenly made the web seem more orderly and accessible, more like a library than a big box of genealogy and porn. That in turn made the web a more welcoming place to put information as well as find it.

Yet scholars find it hard not to be suspicious of a company as hegemonic as Google, especially one whose corporate motto is "Don't be evil." There are lots of academics fretting today about what Google Books and Google Scholar, in their quest to reproduce all human knowledge, will do to libraries, publishing, intellectual property and universities themselves. And we should fret, if that's a necessary precursor to ensuring that the rights of the "content industry" - i.e., everybody - are protected.

But we should not focus on the potential negative implications of Google to the point that we fail to consider the positive ones. As a historian, I am now seeing texts that have clearly benefited from Google searches, uncovering obscure but relevant sources and analyses that would have been utterly untraceable by an army of researchers even a decade ago.

As a teacher, I think Google is helping students' conceptual understanding of research: because it offers them the same interface for school work that they use in their everyday life, they come to their work already grasping the need to come at problems a number of ways, work around the problem and allow themselves to float down interesting, unforeseen paths.

What may be the greatest scholarly benefit of Google is only now making itself apparent. As Google moves into its second decade, we're coming to realize that it is building a history, and a memory. Search by search, Google has been compiling and caching what tech author John Battelle calls the database of intentions, an aggregation of all human desires, needs and preferences, everywhere on the planet, all of the time. This will be of immense value to the market, sure, but it will also serve sociologists, political scientists, philosophers, historians and a range of other researchers across the university as we seek to understand the unfolding

21st century.

We don't know what this will look like, how we'll access it or how Google will monetize (delightful word) this information. The point is that to prepare for such a future, scholars should be thinking seriously about Google now, and what it will mean to both search and research.

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H is for Highlighters

by Alan MacEachern

It happens every year. I'm walking through the library a few weeks into the term when I hear the sound that tells me – after frosh week, after line-ups at add-drop, after the tans have started to fade – that the university year has really begun: the squeak of highlighters being pushed across textbooks.

I suppose it should warm my heart. Everyone is at the top of their academic game, they're still on schedule, they're still reading the assigned readings. But somehow the sight of a line of smart young people with hands poised to swipe a fluorescent yellow stain across a fresh page of text only makes me shudder. No doubt it's the yellow-on-white colours that make me mentally associate highlighting with peeing one's name in the snow, an act infinitely less passive, more creative, and arguably more productive.

Highlighting may be thought just a straightforward form of annotation, a way to draw attention to a passage that the reader thinks is important, sums up the author's argument, or is just interesting. But consider the kind of annotation it provides and the manner of reading it encourages. An American History student reading the Gettysburg Address might highlight "Four score and seven years ago" (because it sounds familiar, and is at the beginning and therefore important), "we are engaged in a great civil war," "we are met on a great battlefield," "It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated," and "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." He has indeed tracked down some of the speech's key phrases, and is likely to be content that these will help him when studying to remember what Honest Abe was on about. (He may be a little concerned that he highlighted too much of the text: almost 20 percent. Those who highlight probably think that all reading material deserves the same amount of fluorescence; too little suggests a lack of attention, too much a lack of discrimination.)

But Ernest Hemingway warned against mistaking motion for action. The student has been so busy looking for phrases – since calling attention to individual words or entire sections equally makes no sense – that he hasn't bothered to think critically about Lincoln's overall speech. The highlighter in hand has physically discouraged him from making notes summarizing the speech or detailing what meaning he drew from it. And if he returns to the text in the future, the yelling yellow (or purple, or blue) will make recapturing the beautiful shape of the speech difficult – or simply unnecessary, since the parts are to serve as the whole. More likely, he won't ever feel obliged to read the address again, because the highlighting serves as evidence he has already done so. I am not curious – yellow.

Highlighting is not so much a step towards understanding text as it is a method of checking off that you've read it, and perhaps that you're capable of recognizing what the author has highlighted with language ("In this chapter, I will …). It is also a way for university students to signal that they are now mature and affluent enough to own books. Highlighting – once again – as marking territory.

I just finished reading University of Toronto professor H. J. Jackson's fascinating *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books*. In it she traces how readers engage in conversation with authors – argue with them, declare their love for them – and in essence become authors themselves. It led me to wonder what highlighting, a subject she doesn't cover, might tell us about how students

read. What would the highlighting from multiple copies of a textbook look like if stacked on top of each other? Would the students tend to agree about what was worth noting, or would they have found value in different parts of the text? Would every word in a chapter be highlighted by someone? If the book's author was asked to highlight his own book, would the result look like the students'?

And so my colleague Bill Turkel and I are now working on a little research project. We begged, borrowed (thanks, Western Bookstore!) and bought 50 used, highlighted copies of Desmond Morton's Working People and Christine Stansell's *City of Women*, scanned a chapter from each, and have begun to digitally map the highlighting. It's too early in the process to report overall findings, but the exercise is already yielding insights. Students disagree considerably about what exactly is worth highlighting. They better recognize key concepts that come at the beginning of paragraphs. They are far more likely to highlight material at the beginning of a book. (Witness the forlorn copy whose first sentence is highlighted, but no other: did the student give up on the highlighting, the book, or the course?) And it seems evident that highlighting really does replace annotating. Just one of the 50 copies contains any handwritten notes whatsoever.

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Close Window

University Affairs
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I is for Ideas

by Alan MacEachern

My daughter, Sadie, turned two in September. We chose the name because it was a family name, but I was secretly pleased that it anagrammed to such a positive word as "ideas." She was a week old before I realized that our last-minute choice of Ruth as a middle name meant anagrammatically that "ideas hurt." (Sadie MacEachern anagrams to "here's an academic" but that is another, entirely inadvertent, story.)

Idea: *Product placements in lectures. "And so Louis Riel was hung for treason in 1885, the same year that Coca-Cola was first sold."*

As academics, so much of our daily work lives are filled with such crap – e-mails and administrative matters and letters of reference and another damn grad committee meeting and listening to ourselves deliver the same lecture in the same room at the same time as last year, the sea of faces actually bearing down on us like a wave, communicating to us the relentlessness of time through the paradoxical medium of young people with no comprehension of the relentlessness of time …

Anyway. Our work lives can be filled with such crap that we forget how very lucky we are that we have jobs in which we're encouraged to have ideas, and more than that to act on them. Sitting in my office, I occasionally think about the ideas being dreamed up and worked on at that very moment across campus. Some are likely incremental – reshaping a dentistry tool, testing methods to improve wheat production, rethinking the roots of American foreign policy – and some are revolutionary – mine – but that there exists such an environment for them to happen is pretty amazing. What's also amazing is how seldom we utilize this proximity to other idea-makers. Most days, I arrive and leave without ever talking to members of other departments; some days, without talking to members of my own.

Idea: *To eliminate requests for extensions, insert in all courses a "built-in" one-week extension policy, so that all assignments can be submitted within a week of the due date, without penalty. Further extensions are granted only because of illness, and only – here's the key – if requested before the original due date.*

At a conference banquet last year, I told a stressed-out PhD student – redundant? – not to worry too much about finding the next project, that academics need only one good idea every decade. A colleague was horrified, I think because he assumed I was counseling laziness. But I stand by it: we have a lot of ideas about research topics, directions, and methods, but the majority of them won't make it to completion, or show the results we foresaw, or make the splash we had hoped. But more to the point, there was no downside to telling the student this. Even if he has already had a good idea this decade, as long as he's the sort of student who has good ideas, he'll have more. He won't be able to help himself.

Idea: *A book one-sentence long, with each of the words footnoted and the footnotes leading on for several hundred pages.*

When people ask me about my column in *University Affairs*, they ask, "What column?" Or

occasionally someone asks, "What are you going to do for X (or Q, or Z)?" Alarmingly, a PhD student at work on an 80,000-word dissertation asked of my 800-word columns, "Where do you get your ideas?" The answers to these last two questions are actually related. I have no idea what I'm going to do for X, Q, or Z – or J, for that matter – but I trust that I'll get ideas for the simple reason that I'll have to. That's the point, I think. We don't have ideas and then begin working. We force ourselves into situations where we have to work and have to have ideas.

Idea: *A newspaper or magazine column written explicitly to people in the future: historians and other researchers who will read it on microfilm, online, or with a technology we haven't invented yet. "Psst, you, in 2040, here's what we were all thinking about, why we were so obsessed with Tom Cruise and mortgage rates." But maybe some people already write for the future. I imagine someone reading this very column. She's smiling, thinking that I'm very silly. Maybe I'm alive, maybe not; whatever. Hi, Sadie.*

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J is for Job Interviews

by Alan MacEachern

Now gather 'round postdocs, all you adjuncts too,
Listen to the story I'm about to tell to you,
If you heed what I say, you'll stand out from the pack,
And soon be takin' a ride down the tenure track.
(harmonica solo)

My first academic job application, to teach history at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, yielded my first academic job interview. Well, that wasn't so hard, I thought. The future king of England would be attending that very department the coming year, and I took to wondering if there was such a position as Royal Historian, and if so, how were the benefits.

St. Andrews flew me in just before Christmas, I strolled the town, I strolled the Old Course, and I blew the interview. It wasn't a complete disaster, in memory at least, but it was no better than a C+. I played it completely wrong. Among a bunch of dry, retiring Brits and Scots already wondering if this young colonial would fit in, for some reason I became this overeager, pushy stereotype of a North American – even American! – male. Bye bye, William. Bye bye, Old Course. Back in Canada, I promised I would do better in the next interview. The phone didn't ring again that winter.

I did have more interviews in the next couple of years, even landed a one-year teaching gig, but never felt on top of my game. One reason was simply the pressure involved. In my field of Canadian history, there are in a good year maybe 10 tenure-track openings in Canada (i.e., on the planet), and you know perfectly well that even with the PhD, the postdoc, the sample syllabi, the course evaluations, the off-prints, the first book (enclosed), and the contract for the second book, everything is riding on the interview itself. A few poorly answered questions can set your retirement plans back a year, maybe forever. I've witnessed a perfectly nice British candidate babble away to a roomful of Canadians about how Canadians mispronounce words. I've heard of a female candidate who drank too much at dinner and threw up, right then, right there.

And then there's the interview process itself. It's a nightmare. You trudge around a strange campus for two days, an uneasy smile plastered to your face, periodically defending, in effect, your life decisions up to that point, while mercilessly stalked by a pack of preoccupied, unenthusiastic zombies and their student sidekick, all who can be heard muttering, "One of us? One of us?" You begin to question wanting a career that measures success as joining this legion of the undead.

But my performance in academic job interviews improved greatly when I realized that rather than thinking of them as horror movies, I should treat them like . . . seductions.

(Disclaimer: The following are my personal musings and in no way represent the opinions or hiring culture of my department or university. For those applying to my department right now, please note that I am not on the appointments committee – and, after this, am unlikely ever to be again. Which may be why I'm writing it.)

That's right, you have to woo a department as you would an *amour*. Rule no.1: don't be over-eager. From the first moment you are greeted by a member of the department, be polite but a little formal. Don't be too friendly, you're not yet friends. Don't lean in when talking to anyone. Don't smile too much. Remember, you don't want them to like you: you want them to love you, to wonder how they go about their daily lives without you.

Rule no.2: appear confident. You don't have to *be* confident, but they're unfamiliar with your tics and tells, so they'll take you at face value. Don't give your moments of doubt or self-confidence away. For Pete's sake, don't tell people you're nervous.

Rule no.3: listen as much as you talk. Don't talk about yourself too much, even if that's what the situation seems to dictate. The goal isn't to have them know everything about you; the goal is to have them think well enough of you that they fill in the gaps themselves with good thoughts. Keep answers sound-bite-sized. Speak quietly when talking about yourself. Allow a little passion when talking about your work. Don't always look people in the eye when talking; gazing into space for a little bit and then returning to eye contact can be surprisingly winning. Be interested in your interviewers as people; treat their time – which they're devoting to you – as valuable. Ask them questions, and listen to what they say. And ask about more than housing markets and teaching loads – questions which are ultimately about you.

And the most important rule of all: never, never, ever say, "That's not how my old university did it."

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K is for Knowledge

by Alan MacEachern

When a student stumps me with a question in class, I've taken to defending my ignorance by explaining, "I'm a profess-or, not a know-er." I think the line is my own, but it may also be from an old episode of The Simpsons, today's number one cause of cryptomnesia.

Knowledge has been on my mind a lot lately. Much of the fall term was spent working on a team grant application in which terms like "knowledge mobilization" and "knowledge impacts" figured prominently. Because I don't tend to use language like this every day – "I'm off to spread knowledge, honey!" – I'll admit to considering these as buzzwords at first. But they soon had the desired effect of having me actually think about how our project would mobilize knowledge, what its impact could be. It also got me thinking about how I teach.

Part of me still subscribes to the quantity theory of education: throw as much as you can at students, because you can never be sure what will stick. We've all had the experience of talking to old students and being amazed when what they remember is an exchange, an aside, an anecdote that we had completely forgotten. We never know exactly what will fire our students' synapses. So in lectures in particular I offer plenty of examples, repeat myself, provide lists, repeat myself. And I get good teaching evaluations in these courses, because that's the way students want to be lectured to: they want to be able to understand what the professor believes is important and they want to be able to take notes. And I can hardly blame them.

Yet I think of an experience early in my career. I developed an environmental history lecture course for science students, and though it seemed like they were fully engaged and asking good questions, halfway through the term it became clear that there was considerable bewilderment about history as a discipline and what was expected of them. The following year, I did a much better job of laying things out in the syllabus and the opening classes – and the course didn't go nearly as well. Throwing the students into the deep end and having them flail around had forced them to think more.

In their 2000 book *The Social Life of Information*, John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid distinguish usefully between "information" and "knowledge." Information is mobile, self-sufficient, self-contained. Knowledge, on the other hand, is much more difficult to convey because it cannot be separated from the individual who possesses it. The authors argue that even in this digital age there is no evidence that "information and its technologies can unproblematically replace the nuanced relations between people." Knowledge continues to demand the full involvement of knowers.

The Social Life of Information doesn't speak solely to educators, but it has much to say to us. Too often in teaching, we are content imparting information, hoping that somewhere in the process this will transmogrify into knowledge. But knowledge doesn't work like that. It involves, above all, the involvement of the person learning. If we want our students to understand our discipline, we have to do more than talk about it; we have to engage them in its practice. "[T]alk without the work, communication without practice is if not unintelligible, at least unusable."

I'm working to incorporate such ideas into my teaching. Last year, I revamped a 300-level seminar course so that the second half of every three-hour class was devoted to working with the

students on their final essays, all which were on the same general topic of the environmental history of the Klondike Gold Rush. We attended a computer lab to do online research together, we talked about writing, we even spent time just sitting around the seminar table reading books, throwing out questions or comments as they came up. I took to thinking of the day in which this class met as Take Your Student to Work Day. But I still haven't really figured out how to incorporate such practices into my lecturing.

Back to my grant application. It's my practice not to let students know what's going on in my life, believing that (in the best possible sense) it's none of their business: they should feel free to knock on my door or ask anything of me without worrying that I'm too busy. But this past fall students could hardly miss that I was running around madly, weeping immoderately. My graduate public history class responded by taking the reins on their group project, a museum exhibit on technological development. The results were first-rate and included some features, like a 3-D exhibit mock-up, which were entirely their own initiative (see their work yourself, at www.invention2innovation.ca).

Ironically, I was so busy writing about knowledge impacts that my students demanded more of themselves than they might have otherwise, with a resulting knowledge impact. Whaddya know.

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L is for Little vs. Big schools

by Alan MacEachern

My assignment for "L" loomed: Lectures? Lifelong learning? Libraries, LSATS, LUGs, leaves, Lodge (David), lowbrow, loquaciousness, licentiousness? Lunch? "L" offers a fine selection, but what I really want to write about, even if it doesn't make for a nice title, is little schools and big schools in Canada.

While an undergraduate at the University of Prince Edward Island, I was once the only student to enrol in a fourth-year history course. The professor and I knew each other, and knew that we both played squash, so we decided to meet in class time on court. It seemed quite civilized (though like many students throughout history, I came to fear my teacher's backhand). In the locker room afterwards and, yes, in the shower, we would discuss my readings from the past week and what I was getting out of them. It was a memorable learning experience.

When I arrived at Queen's for grad school, I found that the students from bigger, more prestigious Canadian universities on the whole had a better grounding in historiography and a better sense of the discipline's current fashions, but their writing wasn't as strong. They'd had the advantage of a greater variety of professors and teaching assistants, but fewer contacts with any one of them and perhaps overall. The personal attention I had received from my UPEI professors meant that I was pretty competitive.

Now I teach at a big "medical- doctoral" university with the population of Charlottetown, and occasionally I notice judgments being made about the quality of education – and educators – at Canada's smaller schools. Maybe the job candidate who's a sessional teacher in the big school is looked upon a little more favourably than the one from the university college. Maybe a member of the graduate committee consistently gives a rougher ride to MA applicants from the periphery than those from southern Ontario.

It's natural to make distinctions between universities. Some are more worthy of esteem than others, and academics offer that esteem in countless ways. (I once knew a North Carolinian who, from what I could determine, had spent a long weekend in Oxford and still carried the accent a decade later. My own department has a Cambridge mafia; every time they wax nostalgic – and, oh, they do wax – about their alma mater, I yell "Cambridge!" and chug.)

But the distinctions made between big and little (and old and new, central and peripheral) universities in Canada is a remnant of an earlier time, when the differences between them were more acute. Most notably, it was understood that the quality of faculty differed, because bigger schools had a considerably higher percentage of faculty with doctorates. But that is no longer the case. I checked the calendar description of three history departments in Canada. One, my own, has 34 full-time faculty members, all of whom have PhDs. The department of a randomly chosen mid-size school has 16 full-time members, all with PhDs. Even the department of a quite small university, again chosen at random, has seven full-time members (itself impressive) and all have PhDs.

Today, young academics apply for jobs at A-list and C-list Canadian universities simultaneously, and it may be the merest of chances that they land the C-list job first. They might feel they're better than the school – that's an almost universal feeling among academics, after all – but they

accept the job because they need the experience and, truth be told, they need the job. There will be opportunities to move on, of course, and there is more academic mobility than there used to be (though in my experience academics are good for no more than two or three moves, whether because they grow content in the position, they're labeled flighty for trying to move too often, or they're simply no longer the next big thing). But having taken that first C-list job, they are immediately classified by some as a C-list academic.

The degree to which bigger schools have better faculty may be something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Working in a big research-intensive university means I have a manageable teaching load, my research efforts are valued and I have access to little pockets of research support. Being at Western hasn't so much validated my worth as an academic as allowed me to be a better academic. So to those in big Canadian schools, I counsel humility. Small schools can offer excellent educations, with excellent educators. As novelist John Crowley writes about the nature of small places, "The further in you go, the bigger it gets. Each perimeter of this series of concentricities encloses a larger world within, until, at the center point, it is infinite. Or at least very very large." The novel? *Little, big.*

P.S. Last month, I directed readers to my students' web exhibit at invention2innovation.ca. But University Affairs *published before the exhibit launched, so some readers weren't able to find it. I'd invite you to visit it now.*

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M is for Meetings

by Alan MacEachern

Before becoming a professor, I was always amused to hear people complain about meetings. It reminded me of being a farm kid, and listening to the *Brady Bunch* kids whine about putting out the garbage. Well, boo hoo. But now, older and wiser, I understand that meetings really are bad, worse than polio, worse than global warming.

Picture a group of professionals whose work life typically involves either working alone or lecturing people half their age. Offer them considerable latitude in how they do their jobs, and make them all essentially the same rank. Keep the group largely intact for decades, so that a long history of slights, feuds, and misunderstandings will develop. Give them above-average recall, for the same reason. Give them brains, so that they can imagine arguing either side of any position at any given time. Now ask them to gather together periodically to discuss as a group how the group is doing, where the group should be going. Close the door.

I have come to dread most everything about academic meetings – such stale air! so many sheep-like upraised hands (if that's not a mixed metaphor)! – but a few things really stand out:

Approval of the minutes. In which it is debated to what degree a two-hour discussion held by 30 people has been accurately translated onto a sheet or two of paper.

The waste of time and resources. A departmental meeting equals 30 people times, what, an average of $35 per hour times two hours equals … a $2,000 meeting. Has there ever been a meeting worth $2,000? Then again, there have been meetings where I would have considered offering $2,100 just to get everyone to agree with me and leave.

The ubiquity of meetings. Library, graduate, curriculum, space use, student awards, appointments, workload, departmental, faculty-level, university-level, union. Not to mention thesis proposals, comprehensives defenses, dissertation committees, thesis defenses. And subcommittees! I recently ran into a retired colleague who looked great. He smiled: "It's the not going to meetings."

The rarity of meetings. With many committees meeting only every couple of months, I have seen it take seasons, even years, for issues to move forward … by which time the committee has been newly constituted, and the process started all over again.

Robert's Rules of Order. Who the hell is this guy? Robert De Niro? ("Are you talkin' to me? Because I'm talkin' first.") Oral Roberts? ("God wants me to talk first.") Fluency with Robert's Rules of Order is like an ability to recite Tennyson: admirable, but beyond the experience of most everyone under 50. I have fantasized in meetings about making a motion to scrap formal rules of order, knowing full well that the chair didn't know the rules well enough to determine whether such a motion was permissible.

The talking. Above all, the talking. Talking, and expecting to be heard, is an occupational hazard for academics. We expect that we have something to say, and we expect to say it. In *A Life in School*, educator Jane Tompkins writes, "I sit in meetings, and before I know it, I've

spoken, passionately, sure there's some point that *has* to be made, which no one can see but me. If the meeting lasts long enough, I have to speak twice, three times. It's got nothing to do with the topic, or very little; the dynamic is almost physical; if I don't talk, I'll explode. … Where two or three are gathered together, there I need to talk, and if I don't, there's a price to pay. When talking is being, and being is being listened to, not talking drains your life away." To which one can only reply: no, Jane, your talking drains everyone else's life away.

But as my colleagues will attest, I am certainly no better. How many times have I thought that debate was winding down, that it was approaching sweet, sweet silence, only to have it roar back to life after an asinine comment … by me. Like Tompkins, I can't help myself.

If I were to look deep into my soul, I think what really disturbs me about meetings is the way they bring to the surface feelings deep in my soul: of anger, frustration, pride, self-satisfaction, distrust. Just as bad, they give me opportunity for reflection on these feelings. Marshall McLuhan once advised Timothy Leary on how to present himself: "Wave reassuringly. Radiate courage. Never complain or appear angry. It's okay if you come off as flamboyant and eccentric. You're a professor, after all. But a confident attitude is the best advertisement. You must be known for your smile."

You must be known for your smile. That's great advice, and I carry it off sometimes. But in meetings, the real me – or another real me – can poke through. Maybe that's why I feel that my colleagues know me too well. Maybe that's why I feel so close to them.

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N is for Networking

by Alan MacEachern

I'm just back from a conference, or, as I call it, sex tourism. Of course I'm only joking, honey: you know what we academics look like. It just strikes me as strange that 21st-century academics – so dedicated to print and isolation in so much of their working lives – still find it necessary to travel periodically to a nice city which they can then ignore, preferring instead the comforts of a hotel with a bar. Or, as the evening progresses, a bar with a hotel. Late night at one conference I heard a voice from the next hotel room cry out, "Foucault … Foucault … Derrida, Derrida, Derrida … Homi K. Bhabha!" This really happened.

Academic conferences are, as someone once said, the leisure of the theory class. Yet we accord them such high seriousness, giving them lofty, inclusive-to-the-point-of-meaningless titles, tightly bound schedules, and a parade of weighty plenaries. In reality, a conference resembles nothing so much as a boat show. Crowds mill about as everyone pitches their sleek whosits, their fresh whatsits. Start-ups look to differentiate themselves from the well-established market. The big companies bring out this year's model of the same old product ("now informed by gender!"). And in the bar, talk turns to whichever rude motor-mouth out-bored all competition. I have recently adopted some guerrilla tactics to oppose conference pretence. When I'm presenting, my PowerPoint "slides" are always loaded upside down. When I'm chairing, the notes I slip to speakers don't say "5 minutes" but rather, "You know, you smell really nice."

It may be that I don't take conferences very seriously because I'm not very good at them. (Admittedly, the converse may also be true.) My plan is always to use the conference as a spur to writing a magnificent scholarly article on a substantial topic. I propose such a paper, with a portentous title like "Canada's Twentieth Century" and it's accepted. But with teaching, meetings, procrastination and other things getting in the way, instead of writing a 30-page article I end up a week before the conference writing a 20-minute presentation now entitled "The Southwestern Prairies in June 1961: An Initial Foray." Well, not 20 minutes: 15. It will probably take time to introduce me, and I have a long name. Then the 15-minute talk invariably gets baked into my brain pan, so that it is impossible to think of the topic ever again as anything but six pages of bulleted notes in 14 pt. font, thereby ruining any chance of ever publishing on it. Eight people attend my talk, three ask questions of the other guy, and I vow never to present at a conference again. Until I hear about an upcoming one in Montreal or Santa Fe.

I worry especially for new scholars, who tend to take the seriousness of conferences at face value. One of my doctoral supervisors, George Rawlyk, firmly advised his students to focus on publishing and not bother with conferences early in their career. He was an old football player, and he used the old football adage that when you throw the ball, three things can happen and two of them are bad.

He was right. Too much can go wrong for new scholars at conferences: they may spend $1,000 they don't really have, they may present poorly, they may get picked at or picked apart in questioning, no one may come to their session, they may spend two days in their hotel room, rearranging sentences that they will never get to say in the allotted 20 minutes. Or they may just feel very, very lonely.

Things do improve once you've been to a few conferences and realize that they can be less about

presenting and listening to talks than about networking – a hideous term for meeting people you want to meet and talking to them. Once you reach that stage, conferences can at their best feel like real old-time revival meetings, from which you return to your home university revitalized about your field.

If ever given the chance to organize a conference, I'll scrap as many of the formal elements as possible in favour of out-and-out networking. At the opening, there will be an element of speed-dating (an unfortunate comparison, I admit), so that everyone talks to everyone else at least once. The ratio of time given to sessions to time given to meals will drop vertiginously. There will be discussions rather than presentations. There will be field trips attended by all. There will be ice cream at the breaks. Come, join me.

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Close Window

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O is for Office hours

by Alan MacEachern

Summer is no time to read or write about office hours. It's a beautiful day outside my window, and members of the local Emergency Response Unit are demonstrating their rappelling skills, happily bouncing down the side of my building. Inside, it's stiflingly hot. Our early 1970s Stalinist building has no windows that open and its air conditioning is on the fritz. I feel like one of those scientists early in a Bond movie overcome by nerve gas, who slide down the glass wall while James coolly looks on. (When headhunted by evil genius, negotiate ventilation.)

So why am I here? Well, because I work for a living and my office is where I work. There's a computer, books, a phone, and nary a two-year-old. Italo Calvino says somewhere about an academic – okay, it's page 22 of Mr. Palomar – "he is lucky … he can say he is working in places and attitudes that would suggest complete repose; or, rather, he suffers this handicap: he feels obliged never to stop working, even when lying under the trees on an August morning…." Inspired by this many years ago, I chose to become a 9-to-5 scholar, and the best way to achieve that seemed to be to work in my office.

Which meant that on arriving at Western, I faced a decision about office hours. If I was in most of the time, did it make any sense not to see students who drop by? Or should I keep the door shut, opening the office a few hours per week, like some inconvenient strip mall store (students waiting impatiently to enter while I laconically hose down the hallway)? It really wasn't much of a decision: I flung open the door, signaling my own openness, my willingness to listen to students. I installed comfy chairs. I silently vowed to see all visitors for as long as they needed me. It would all make for more work, but it was heartening to know that I would be memorialized on student websites, yearly performance evaluations, and, eventually, my gravestone as The Fighting Young Prof Who Could Talk to the Young.

But in the intervening years my office door has slowly, incrementally been closing, to the point that on some days it now actually rests against the jamb. It sends the message that though people can still visit, they will have to invest a knock.

Taken as a barometer of my teaching life, my door's move to ajarness is, uh, jarring. What happened to me?

It would be easy to blame students. The overloud hallway debates about Family Guy. The students who flop into chairs unannounced, who stand over me and stare at my computer screen, who, God love 'em, say they're waiting to talk to another professor. The worst may be students' preferred conversational opening: "Are you busy?" I'm sitting in my office, at my desk, pointed toward an open Word document! How can I say no! How can I say yes! (I need a sabbatical.)

But of course it's not really the students, it's that I am busy. It has been a surprise to find that rather than the work settling down after a few years in an academic job, it has steadily increased. There are more people who know your work, more committees to be qualified for, more grad student responsibilities. I write this as if there was no choice involved, but of course there was. After years in the graduate and postgraduate wilderness, waiting and wanting to be

called on, I as a new professor took on more and more. And each time I said yes, my office door closed a little.

It's troubling to feel that you don't have enough time to do probably the most important part of your job well. And more, that a defining characteristic of this part, its lack of structure (you never know what a student will need to talk about, when, or for how long), is what most threatens it. The obvious solution is to structure it – and thus office hours were born in the first place, to consolidate interaction with students into more efficient "quality time."

My new-school-year resolution will be to resist making student interaction more efficient. But maybe that means more than propping my door open. Maybe it means reconceptualizing where and how meetings with students take place. A colleague talks about implementing out-of-office hours, in which his students will know that he takes a daily midday walk on an unvarying route – like Kant, he says immodestly – and that they are welcome to join and leave him at any point along the way. It is a nice idea. As much as I like my office for working, most days are more beautiful outside.

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P is for Publishing

by Alan MacEachern

"Must be great to have the summers off." "So you're not working now?" "When are you back to work?" Every non-academic I know says something like this to me sooner or later. Except my father, but only because he assumes I never work.

Most people, including many students, assume that professors work 24-7. That's 24 hours a week, seven months a year. They don't cotton onto the fact that we are hired to do teaching, research and service, and that together these make for a year-round occupation. I once tried to explain to my father my job's 40-40-20 work ratio and the thinking behind it: "You know the 12-24-24 bags you spread on the fields? You don't put just nitrogen on one field, or apply only potash one year. You need a regular mix of nitrogen, phosphate and potash for the whole system to work at its best." "Your job is like fertilizer?"

Where my analogy really broke down was in suggesting a regular and consistent division of effort. We tend to teach from September through April and spend the remaining months doing what we had insufficient time for during "the school year." It's more efficient than continually multitasking, I guess, though one could say the same thing about inhaling six months of the year and exhaling the others.

Actually, to suggest that 40 percent of our job is research is misleading: to count as research, the research has to lead to writing, and writing has to lead to publishing.

Publishing has been in my thoughts lately because my summer has been completely devoted to co-editing an undergraduate textbook. No time for teaching or service or cottaging or tanning, I have wooed and wheedled 16 scholars into producing 16 all-new Canadian environmental history essays. What's remarkable is that they've all produced, they've all given up a considerable portion of their own summers to the effort, and without the promise of the hundreds of thousands of dollars in royalties I am likely to receive (sorry, folks).

But it's equally remarkable that I spent the time, considering that a textbook isn't worth very much to me professionally. If I'd produced the identical book for a university press rather than a textbook publisher, it would be more highly valued by my department's Performance Evaluation Committee – even though the two have quite similar peer review processes. To non-academics, it must sound a little daffy to hear that we're judged more highly for communicating to one another than to students. And God forbid we move beyond those circles: this past year my performance evaluation score for research plummeted, and the only change in my output was that I had started writing this column. True story. Publish and perish. I'm not bitter.

Scholarly publishing is bound tightly to prestige, but the economics of that relationship is going to have to change. On the one hand, authors are increasingly expected to help fund their print publications by way of the Aid to Scholarly Publications Program, university subventions or out of pocket. A friend of mine committed $12,000 of her own money to making sure that her book – to be published by a major Canadian university press – had the maps and photos it needed. She saw this as an investment: in History, a book can be the difference between landing and not landing a tenure-track job. But if she'd offered the same money to a vanity publishing firm, no university would touch her, regardless of her book's quality. She was paying $12,000 for the

academic press's imprimatur and two readers' reports.

On the other hand, the Internet is making available an infinite number of scholarly publishing opportunities. Even self-publishing on a faculty or personal website doesn't necessarily preclude eventual academic press publication, as McKenzie Wark's Gamer Theory or Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig's Digital History demonstrate. With the economic model for scholarly publication shifting underfoot, so will our conception of what counts. Because not everything should count. Publishing may become easier, but writing will be just as difficult, so more publishing threatens to produce simply more bad writing. I think of Larry McMurtry's words: "For a novelist to take the work out of work is profoundly self-defeating: keeping the work in work is all-important."

That's tough advice: once you get the publishing bug, you want to communicate as much as possible as quickly as possible. And more than vanity is involved. Ultimately, the reason my textbook's 16 authors were willing to complete their chapter this summer was that there is a joy in unearthing something new and communicating it to others. Milan Kundera writes about the "great immortality" enjoyed by those remembered by people who never knew them personally, as compared to the "minor immortality" we enjoy in the memories of those who know us. Given that, the book is a perfect object, communicating to people we don't know and dedicated to those we love.

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Q is for Quiet

by Alan MacEachern

Note: If reading this online, open another window and download Van Morrison's "So Quiet in Here." Let it play softly in the background as soundtrack to the column. If you're reading this in the "print-page" version, hum instead, and contemplate the future of magazines.

If you're like me, and I know you are, you find some things about students pretty irritating. The grade-grubbing, the oversized sunglasses (like celebrities, like clowns), the obsessive working out, the keenness, the indifference, the Uggs. Sure sure, the children are our future, but do they have to be so present? Maybe the most irritating thing about students is the noise. Frosh week sets the tone, literally, when they are taught that university life is all about singing, chanting, and drunkenly yelling, "Whoooo!" (I am fascinated by whoooo!'s rise to hegemony in the past 20 years, incidentally. Please see my forthcoming multi-volume *Huzzah, Harrumph, and Hoo-yah: A History of Mass Approbation*.) Then when classes begin, we lecture at them or reward them for speaking up in seminars. Is it any wonder that students become conditioned for sound, and that they feel obliged to fill in any potentially quiet moment in their lives with a cell phone or an iPod? Walk around campus, and rarely do you see students alone with their thoughts, even in the library.

Wikipedia defines "quiet" as – wait a minute, it's changing, hold on…. Never mind.

About the only period of student life that is structured for sustained quiet contemplation is the PhD comprehensive exams. Students in my field are expected over a number of months to read a couple hundred books, often from individually tailored lists that do not easily accommodate group study. But come to think of it, my own comps experience is hardly an endorsement of such quiet time. The months spent alone made me rather strange. I took to waking up speaking, with bits of historical aphorisms – "… spite of geography but because of it!" – pouring out of my mouth. By the completion of the exams, I felt that I had been trained to be an introvert. And if the comps process is to be preparation for scholarly life, it is quite obviously a failure because it doesn't resemble that life: never again will the individual experience such a lengthy period of reading – or of focusing so fixedly on any single project, for that matter. There are always many things to do. Academics are people who give a number of jobs – teaching, research, administration – less time than they would like to, less time than they deserve.

There is a famous talk by mathematician Richard Hamming entitled "You and Your Research"; you can find it online. In it he discusses which working strategies seemed to work best among the top researchers he knew. [1] One of his contentions is that productivity is not necessarily tied to environment: though some researchers liked quiet workplaces and others active ones, many did their best work in what they themselves considered poor working conditions. Success, he believes, is more a matter of what you are doing than the conditions in which you are doing it. The deadly distractions are not environmental, then, but internal, self-imposed. Hamming tells of having infuriated researchers he met by asking them some quite basic questions: *What are the most important problems in your field? Are you working on one of them? Why not?* Let that sink in.

Most of us not only let ourselves get distracted but actually seek out distractions that pull us away from accomplishing all we can, all we've promised, or all we want to do. A colleague of

mine says that when it comes time for him to write, he suddenly needs to have the cleanest oven in town. Me, I write e-mails or to-do lists, or, I suppose, commit to a series of 26 columns. What makes it difficult to treat such pathology is that some distractions turn out to be more valuable than what you were distracting yourself from. More than that, distractions are life. As much as we have all fantasized about leaving our families, renting a bachelor apartment, and writing our magnum opus – we have all fantasized about that, right? – to do so is probably not in our best interest.

So maybe I should cut noisy students some slack. If it seems they're not taking their studies seriously or not developing good work habits, perhaps they are just in the process of discovering which distractions are useful and which are just distracting. Some will find out too late, or never, and that's life, too. Still, something has to be done about those sunglasses.

1 I should have re-read Hamming before writing "O is for Office Hours." He believes that people who keep their office door closed get more work done in the short term, but in time their work suffers. "He who works with the door open gets all kinds of interruptions, but he also occasionally gets clues as to what the world is and what might be important."

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R is for Role models

by Alan MacEachern

In the 1980s, I read a string of Robert Ludlum novels in which the protagonist was invariably a history professor at a small northeastern U.S. college whose life is turned upside down when a computer at a shadowy agency spits out his name as the person whose mix of intelligence, foreign policy expertise, facility with languages and ruggedness borne of jogging and squash made him the ideal candidate for a top secret mission in Ubiquistan. Is it any wonder I chose the career I did?

Academics are blessed with so many role models in literature, television and film that there is really no excuse for not knowing how to behave. I have always found novels particularly helpful. Books like *Lucky Jim, Pnin, The Human Stain, White Noise, The World According to Garp*, my personal favourite *Straight Man*, and, of course, the three David Lodge novels *Small World, Nice Work,* and *Changing Places* provide guidance in a way that mentors alone can't. Once you hear "gradual students" defined as students who gradually realize they don't want to be students any more (*Garp*), once you read, "Morris read through the letter. Was it a shade too fulsome? No, that was another law of academic life: it is impossible to be excessive in flattery of one's peers" (*Small World*), once you learn that search committees fret that "To hire someone distinguished would be to invite comparison with ourselves, who were undistinguished. … To make matters worse, we were suspicious of any good candidate who expressed interest in us" (*Straight Man*), it is impossible not to think of such academic matters in these terms again.

True, characterizations of academe are often fanciful. Tom Hanks is too well-dressed in *The Da Vinci Code*, Aaron Eckhart too pretty in *Possession*, Harrison Ford too Harrison Ford in *Indiana Jones*. Actors train for parts all the time, so would it kill someone playing a scholar to spend a few months in front of a microfilm reader? Though we roll our eyes at how we are portrayed, we can't deny a sense of validation. Our profession is seen as an interesting one, in which interesting things happen. When did you last watch a movie about welders? Has there ever been a good book about a carpenter?

There are any number of reasons universities are so well-represented on page and screen. For one thing, writers – and even TV has writers, we're told – like to write about what they know, and some of them are or were professors. More to the point, most attended university, which has become almost as universally familiar an institution as school itself, and so almost as common a setting for stories. But it is also the qualities of the university which make it an environment for, and source of, drama. It is its own society, dynamic and self-contained. (Hence the virtual absence of works set in continuing studies programs, in much the same way that there is no *Home School Confidential* or *Home School Musical*.) And the university offers a useful mix of transformation and tradition: it possesses the *bildungsroman*'s required opportunity for personal development while retaining a deep sense of convention, whether evinced in the rhythm of the school year, the architecture, or the professor's unvarying wardrobe.

Yet I can't help but think that it is this sense of academic time which leads to the great failure of academic fiction: its inability to integrate the experiences of students and professors. Can you name any campus-set work that offers three-dimensional characterizations of both groups, or even attempts to give the two equal treatment? It's as if the linear progress from frosh week to graduation means that students too easily represent change, while the cyclical progress from

school year to school year (not to mention the comforts of tenure) means that professors too easily represent stasis. As a result, there is no common ground.

Things weren't always so calcified. *Lucky Jim*'s ending is surprising today precisely because the professor protagonist voluntarily leaves university for another job. In recent decades, about the only time students and professors in fiction get together is to have sex: think *Disgrace, The Corrections, The Life of David Gale, The Squid and the Whale, One True Thing, Little Miss Sunshine, The World According to Garp, Friends – Friends!* – and *Terms of Endearment*. And sex that, as in a horror movie, must inevitably end in punishment. Not only is this a tired and embarrassing narrative practice, it wrongly suggests that the student-professor relationship is one inevitably defined by tension, sexual and otherwise. And since real teachers and real students look to fiction for role models, there are real-world implications for how we interact, how universities work. Students and professors need role models who talk to one another.

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S is for Students

by Alan MacEachern

Manitoba recently reported the findings of its *Survey of Early Leavers*, involving almost 1,500 full-time university and college students who dropped out before completing their program. In any given year, about one-quarter of the province's undergraduates become "early leavers," so the study was an opportunity to better understand a situation with a presumably significant social cost. What's especially noticeable about the report is the degree to which early leavers were satisfied with the educational system, and still left.

Sixty percent of the early leavers had enrolled in a university with a specific career in mind, and 80 percent were attending their school of choice. In other words, they were relatively focused. They may have overestimated their abilities – about two-thirds rated their communication skills at admission as "good" or "excellent" – but that's likely no different than the general university population.

The most common explanation for why they dropped out, given by 44 percent of respondents, was a realization that the program was "not for them." Another 23 percent were working to finance their studies, and couldn't maintain a job and university simultaneously. There was little indication of bitterness toward the university. Eighty-one percent described their instructors as accessible, 76 percent were satisfied with the quality of education they received and, remarkably, 79 percent were still satisfied with their initial decision to enrol. Most respondents apparently did not feel that they had been weeded out of university: 57 percent planned to return, and 40 percent were in fact already doing so.

This made me think about the master's students I see occasionally at Western – often the students with the best undergraduate records – who hit a wall within a month or two of arrival. They have hopped from high school to university, moved through their first degree, and then sail into their second with no clear sense of why they are doing so: it is as much inertia as anything else. The master's program I run is one year, so most students tough it out, even if they have come to doubt the wisdom in having enrolled. But the same sense of uncertainty occurs among undergraduates, when high-achieving high school students suddenly find themselves questioning what they are doing in this program, this university or university at all. Given that this is a four-year investment, many quite sensibly decide it is time to step back and do something else, perhaps work or travel, before continuing their education. They see this as a personal decision and not reflective of the broader system.

The Manitoba report's executive summary opens with the blunt declaration: "Overall, students who leave postsecondary institutions in Manitoba do so for reasons not primarily related to the institution." This may be strictly true. But doesn't the institution, the system, bear some responsibility for admitting so many students who turn out not to be fit or fitted for the programs they chose, or at least not ready to complete them? Add the students who muddle through or switch programs – neither group would appear in this survey – and you have a significant portion of the university community investing a lot of time and money in things that aren't really right for them.

Last month, in "R is for Role Models," I noted that there are many more works about professors than welders. (I also challenged readers to name a good book about a carpenter. To those who

responded "the New Testament," there's no prize.) And the unequal distribution occurs within universities, too: fictional faculty almost always teach within the humanities or social sciences, most often in English or history. In books and movies today there's nary a sign of a chemistry department or a business school – let alone a trade school. This gives young people a skewed sense of what options are available. They are trained to assume not only that they will go to university, but also what they will take when they get there. We read about the steps to inform young women about engineering programs, but growing up on Prince Edward Island I had no idea what engineering was either. I didn't know if an undergraduate degree in history would be financially rewarding – what on PEI was? – but at least I could conceive of the program.

Universities can't dictate to culture, to make sure that the next big college movie is set in an engineering faculty or that the next J.K. Rowling is set among physics students. For that very reason, we have to do a lot better job ourselves of giving would-be new students a lot more information about what might lie ahead for them, about their options – including community college and trades. And we have to identify and promote academic role models on our own. We can't assume that either high school guidance counselors or TV will tell would-be frosh everything they need to know.

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Close Window

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T is for Technology

by Alan MacEachern

Whenever I enter my university library, I feel that there's an army stationed to repel patrons seeking books. Across the vast landscape, a phalanx of young recruits has dug in behind computer terminals. Deference librarians run among them, attending their needs. And far off in the distance, a lone figure – Conan the Librarian? – guards the bookshelves themselves.

It would be so much more welcoming if libraries retained just one token row of books at their entrance, like a stand of trees camouflaging a clear-cut.

It's not that I disapprove of technology per se. As much as I like real books, I have also fallen deeply for Canadiana.org and Google Books. (Keyword searchable obscure 19th-century texts: oh baby.) It's that there has been such a proliferation of information technologies in recent years, and universities feel obliged to keep up with all of them.

And so do many academics. No one forces us to move from overheads to PowerPoint, or adopt WebCT, or let students instant message us, or post lectures on our website, or have a website. Last year, the University of Western Ontario started a blog on its website – what modern university wouldn't have a blog? – asking periodic questions and encouraging discussion. The most-answered question to date, by a considerable margin, is whether lectures should be turned into downloadable podcasts. Most students were very enthusiastic about the idea: it would help them better understand what the professor meant, improve their studying, let them catch up if they were sick or snowed in or varsity athletes (I like that one), assist in teaching evaluation, advertise the class to prospective students, and so on. Time to buy *Podcasting for Dummies*.

But before embracing a new technology for our teaching or research, academics need to ask why we are doing so. Is it because of the intrinsic value of the technology, the software, the medium? Is it to be trendy? Is it to connect with students at their level? Or, a cousin of this, is it in hopes of staying young or appearing to do so – buying an iPod being cheaper and more immediate than getting fit?

One quite valid reason for us learning new technology is to teach our students how to use it and use it critically. We oldsters often assume that kids nowadays just *know* how new things work. They don't. In a seminar last year, I had students visit a computer lab to learn about online research. To begin, I offered $5 to the first student who could determine how old I was. It was revealing to watch them all race to Google, try a few keywords, and then stall, utterly defeated. It took a lot of hinting before one student made it to the library catalogue, where they found my name as an author and my year of birth, 1971 *[hmm – Ed.]*. Less than a decade ago, some professors were banning the use of web resources in research papers; though the web has gained universal acceptance in universities today, I'm not convinced there's been much of an improvement in teaching how to use it.

Last year, with a great deal of help from my colleague William Turkel, my graduate public history class and I invested heavily in technology. The students all created blogs to engage in reflective practice and, in an act of solidarity, I created one too. I ran the course website with WordPress, the class used a wiki to organize the group project and StreetPrint to build an online repository, and the students learned SketchUp and Dreamweaver to develop a museum exhibit and

accompanying website. If that sounds exhausting, it sometimes was. But it also served to teach the students not just the applications themselves, but also when and how they might use – or not use – them. More to the point, these history students and their professor learned that they could learn 21st-century tools, and learned that they would need to keep learning. Still, I won't downplay how much time and energy was invested, some of which didn't pay off (the nature of any experiment). And my blog has lapsed.

My sense is that the entire culture is on the cusp of dealing in a new way with the proliferation of technology. Like an inversion of Moore's Law, which states that the number of transistors on a computer chip will double regularly, the rate at which technologies become obsolete or out-of-fashion (and really that's the same thing) is also doubling. As a result, we will become more discriminating about which technologies we choose to adopt. Western's blog, mentioned earlier, posted 20 questions in its first year, but its first five questions generated almost 75 percent of the responses to date. Participation has plummeted. And that's not surprising: students, like faculty, can only invest in so many networks, media, applications and technologies at once. A recent question on the blog asked, "Is there an information overload on campus?" No one took the time to answer.

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U is for Undergraduates

by Alan MacEachern

Last week I sat down with some local high school social studies teachers to talk about preparing students for university. Realizing that they might be flashing back to their own time in university, as I was about high school, I put them at ease by dressing like a professor of the early 1990s (i.e., the same as always).

It turns out that our memories of our educational experiences are an issue, if not a problem. Just as I undoubtedly expect first-year undergraduates to have had high school years like mine, the teachers prepare high school students by telling about their own university years, unaware of what has changed. One teacher believed that you still can't use Internet sources for most university essays. None knew that the University of Western Ontario, the local university choice, has dropped its three-year degree program. They spoke of helping students transition to frosh life by upping the word count on grade 12 history essays – even as Western history has turned to shorter first-year assignments, both in response to incoming students' skills and to ward off plagiarism.

One teacher took the fact that the average Ontario student's grades drop 16 percent upon entering university as proof in itself that high schools aren't preparing students adequately. I wasn't convinced. This might reflect faults in the university system, or just be a form of Stockholm syndrome: the more years you spend with a student, the more competent he or she seems. Still, much of our time was spent discussing students' transition from one assessment system to another. In Ontario, teachers grade all assignments on the basis of four categories (knowledge/understanding, thinking/inquiry, communication, and application) at one of four "levels" (demonstrating "limited," "some," "considerable," or "thorough/high" accomplishment in a variety of skills), so a student might receive a 2-, 3+, 1, and 4 on a single essay. Not until the final report card are all these scores sifted together into one percentage grade – the implication being that kids can figure out levels, but parents can't. I asked the teachers whether they thought it likely that in adding all those small scores, they continually gave students the benefit of the doubt and continually rounded up, contributing to grade inflation; they thought that was quite possible.

A few of the teachers found the levels system cumbersome – one called it "bizarre" – but most saw reasoning behind it, and believed that since the levels eventually corresponded to percentage grades, the system was more or less in line with the university one. More of the teachers expressed concern that students can only be assessed for skills directly related to curriculum expectations. What this means in practice is that teachers must accept all assignments, whenever they arrive. As one local school board states in its policy, "teachers are not to include such things as work habits, participation, effort, completion of work [!], punctuality and reward marks for handing in assignments on time in determining the report card achievement grade." As you might expect, kids quickly figure this out. The teachers debated how much effect this really has. The best students still submit on time, or at least submit good work at some point. But the not-so-good students, and particularly the ones not getting much guidance from their parents, don't. "We're not doing students any favour," said one teacher, "in telling them, 'It's due, but not really due.'" And the teachers as a group wondered how well students responded to the change when they hit university: they had already heard stories of students struggling with the realization that professors impose late marks or simply don't accept late work.

It's not that the university system is better than the school system. (The teachers, for example, thought it rather silly that some professors still give participation marks, and they're probably right.) Much of our discussion centred on how we dealt with issues we share, like plagiarism, the loss of grade integrity, and teaching in an era when, as in Lake Wobegon, all the kids are above average.

Rather, it's that we don't know enough about each other. One person I spoke to said that he had taught high school in five school boards, and had never spoken to anyone from a university. Maybe that's not surprising, in a province that has both a Ministry of Education and a Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities. But it's ridiculous, given that high schools are to prepare many of their students for university, and universities are so reliant on the job high schools have done.

One of the teachers has invited me back, so that we can grade photocopied copies of the same few essays and see how our marking compares. It's not much, but it's something. I hope it's a start.

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V is for Vendetta

by Alan MacEachern

A couple of years ago I was asked by the University of Prince Edward Island to write a short piece about its founding in the early 1970s. The eventual product was a 9,000-word, 48-page booklet – not my magnum opus, but a nice little effort, I thought, and an always welcome addition to my ISBN life list. Fun, interesting, harmless. Until some time later, when I received an e-mail with the subject line "OPEN LETTER TO PROFESSOR ALAN MACEACHERN REGARDING HIS BOOK …." E-mails can't explode, so like an idiot I opened it. It was a 13,000-word excoriation of my little volume, offering 98 withering, highly rhetorical questions about my meaning, my motivation, my mental state at what seemed like every sentence along the way.

My correspondent was a professor at a Canadian university. It is not often that an author touches a reader so deeply that they respond with a text 50 percent longer than the original, so I was oddly flattered, and replied immediately, briefly and relatively graciously. Bemusement is the first stage of involvement in an academic feud, apparently, followed by incredulity, irritation, being kind of creeped out, outrage, more outrage, feeling (as in *Lucky Jim*) like spending the next decade on the nemesis's topic so that you can ultimately position yourself to review the person's work unfavourably, growing acceptance, finding the humour in it all and, finally, bemusement.

There is probably no reason to protect my correspondent's anonymity – the e-mail was continually referred to as an OPEN LETTER, after all, and its author threatened to forward it to anyone who sought an opinion of my book – but I will, just in case that person has had second thoughts. Instead, I'll anagram his or her name somewhere later in this column.

Academic disputes are considered rather silly affairs, more Frasier/Niles than Frazier/Ali. The standard quip, attributed to Henry Kissinger, is that academic politics are vicious precisely because the stakes are so small. Well yes, Mr. Kissinger, rarely do debates in literary theory spiral into the bombing of Cambodia, you have us there. I really hate the use of the Kissinger line, usually by academics themselves, typically in an effort to stifle academic debate. Attempting to minimize a debate's significance is an unfair rhetorical technique, like inconsistent people's parroting of Emerson's line that consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds.

What's worse about the too-quick quoting of Kissinger is that it misses what truth there is in the statement. The stakes in academic debate are small in the sense that the participants generally retain their livelihood afterward. But this means that the stakes which do exist are purer, and lie in the principles behind the debate itself. It's not like in politics or kickboxing, where an attack on my opponent is a clear advantage to me. If I offer a negative critique of an academic's ideas, whether in the form of a book review, a grant application assessment, a rejoinder in a departmental meeting or a comment over cocktails, the recipient faces the sting of knowing that the assessment may not be self-motivated. It might actually be honest. No wonder disputes develop.

Believe it or not, kind reader, I myself have participated in any number of such squabbles. I'm more or less okay with that, having decided long ago that if at least 10 percent of people aren't in angry disagreement with me at any given time, I'm not really trying. That doesn't make the disputes themselves easier to deal with, by the way: invariably, it's the wrong 10 percent idiotically misinterpreting the wrong 10 percent of something I've said or written.

But perhaps it's time that I mellow, and take this opportunity to patch things up with those I've sparred with over the years. You know who you are. The fact that you are reading this column after all that we've been through is itself an olive branch of sorts, and I would be a fool not to clutch it. You should know that I have always deeply respected your work and person, and even envied your heightened feeling of self-worth and acute sense of personal entitlement. Know above all that I would never have allowed our difference of opinion to have flowered in the first place if I hadn't first considered you my senior – what, after all, is the sense in having an academic nemesis junior to oneself? One looks weak. (My apologies for only drawing this to your attention now.) I hope that we can move beyond all this, that we can develop a professional relationship which has as its foundation this long-shared, intense feeling for one another. For isn't the opposite of hatred not love, but apathy?

Airborne snot.

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W is for Winter

by Alan MacEachern

W is for winter. You're reading this in early spring, so you may not remember, but I'm writing it in winter and can assure you that winter is a cold hell for academics. Our first-term glow is gone, we're no longer ahead in our class preps, we've stopped eating in the faculty lounge in case there are faculty there. We dream of summer, when we will finally finish that overdue article, develop that new course, or simply read. Winter is no time to do any of these. Or, it would appear, to write anything – even 800 words – on a single subject. Or on deadline.

W is also for Writing. No undergraduate reads *University Affairs*, so I can speak freely about "Howlers," Canadian faculty's annual August bacchanalia celebrating bad student writing from the previous year. (See you in Thunder Bay!) For nine days, we laze in lawn chairs clutching single malts, reading out the worst of the worst, laughing ourselves silly. And when the sun goes down we head into the giant tent to enter the students' personal information on a nationwide database that ensures they will have a hard time getting their transcripts. Some attendees focus on grammatical mistakes, berating those idiots who use prepositions to end sentences with. I prefer instances of accidental humour. Like the clearly distracted young fellow whose essay spoke to me of "the awkward backing-and-forthing of social intercourse." Or the timeless eloquence of "God's archenemy Stan."

There's been talk about opening Howlers to bad faculty writing, if we can find sufficient examples. I welcome it. Recently, I was reading a book from an academic press that in passing introduced Darwin "and his widely read treatise on evolution, entitled *The Origin of Species* (1859)." I couldn't finish the book. I couldn't get past this sentence. It wasn't that *On the Origin of Species* was the original title, that's an easy mistake. It was the superfluous "entitled." How can an academic writing for an academic press and a largely academic audience not know that he or she has to race through a sentence introducing a universally well-known author and book as quickly as possible? The sentence's very existence is borderline insulting, but to dally is outright offensive. You're not entitled to "entitled"!

One should be able to put a number value on bad writing, with an error's severity based on the speed of the reader's deceleration. If the reader smirks at the dangling modifier in the rearview mirror, that's a 10 on the Strunkometer. If the reader has to shift down to figure out what the author means, that's a 50. If the reader comes to a full stop, and reverses either in bewilderment, to rubberneck, or to jot it down for the next Howlers, that's a 100. A writer's goal is to help the reader open it up. Or if not, to purposely lay down speed bumps that regulate speed.

W is for Western. Shameless product placement.

W is for Weapons. Last year, all employees at my university took Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System training. While learning to recognize the labels for compressed gas, bio-hazardous infectious materials and the like, I got to wondering how I would react during a school shooting. Not whether or not I would be a hero, but simply what was expected of me. Was I to direct others, or just get myself outside as fast as possible? Where was I to go? What was the protocol? Isn't it statistically more likely that my history department will face a gunman than a methanol leak? But I got my certificate.

W is for Words. A scholar at a conference speaks eloquently on her research for 20 minutes. The first question afterward is, "Would you flesh out … ?" Why can't we just reply: "No. It took me a long time to figure out how to say it. If there's more to be said, you'll have to start. Then maybe – maybe – I'll respond." If we were poets, no one would ask us to flesh out our sonnets.

W is for Work. A friend believes there are two types of professors: those who call university "school" and those who call it "work." She may be onto something. I have always been a school person, but have been drifting toward work in the past few years. The difference, I think, has been increased administrative responsibilities. It's not that such work is fundamentally more work-y than teaching is, but rather that the seasonality of the teaching year lets you pretend you're not working at all, whereas administration is more unremitting, making (in my case) History seem like one damn thing after another.

In that sense, maybe feeling irritable about winter is a blessing: it signals that I still see my life in terms of school, am still looking to the possibility of rejuvenation in spring.

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May 2008

X is for Xerox

by Alan MacEachern

I once interviewed an elderly New Brunswick couple who, when the Depression hit, enrolled in barber and hairdresser schools, figuring that people always needed their hair cut. As someone teaching Canadian history, that resonated. If the worst happens, will my skills be needed? Ultimately, I didn't forsake academe for a more apocalypse-resistant (let alone apocalypse-retardant) occupation like hairdressing, archery or optometry, but I have tried to adapt in my own modest ways. If my colleagues are in the position of deciding which colleague to eat, I want them to say, "Let's save MacEachern for later. He knows how to use the scanner."

"The" scanner because there is only one, of course. Just as there is only one pencil sharpener, one colour printer (broken for five years, since the day it arrived), one working stapler in my department.

At times you can find four or five professors with 12 or 15 degrees clustered around my department's lone Xerox machine, waiting to make copies of course outlines, maps (inevitably Western Europe, usually the First World War, often the Schlieffen Plan), receipts, cartoons or, sheepishly, application materials. When the copier jams, as it invariably does, you get to witness firsthand that in a crisis more people really do succumb to lethargy than panic. Otherwise-intelligent adults stare at the floor, poke aimlessly at flashing buttons on the copier and hope beyond hope that someone else will go fetch a member of the office staff. My department is now quietly seeking a tenure-track candidate with a background in photocopier repair; all our ads now state that "Interest in the history of reproductive technologies an asset."

Which all leads to the question of why faculty are doing their own photocopying anyway. It used to be a given that professors would dump reams of handwritten pages or an audiocassette on a secretary's desk, confident that it would be promptly typed up and ready to be submitted for publication, all for a cheery acknowledgement down the road. That, and it was her job. The worlds of faculty and staff were fundamentally distinct, except when they occasionally married. But today, Microsoft has made everyone their own secretary. Most faculty members can commiserate with staff as to the shortcomings of Word, and may even be able to offer tips about PowerPoint.

It would be nice to see in this the evidence of a desire for egalitarianism, a belief that there should be no hierarchies within academe but rather just a group of folks pitching in to get a job done. Academics tend to skew to the left, so maybe we are unconsciously fashioning our own communal, utopian society within the ivory tower. Or maybe not. Other factors are likely at play. For one, young faculty members have been trained to be DIY by their experiences prior to landing their job; in my field, professors are hired already possessing essentially the same credentials they once required for tenure. They have taken control of every part of their career, and many continue to do so at the day-to-day level by doing their own photocopying or even managing their own faculty website.

But perhaps the main reason is that faculty see how busy office staff already are. Staff are expected to know the calendar inside and out, understand how the entire university works, offer solutions to an infinite variety of students' academic problems, help manage up to millions of research and personnel dollars, still perform for some older faculty the duties always expected of them, and be the department's default ambassador, party planner, institutional memory and web designer. And drop everything to get the photocopier up and running.

A colleague occasionally reminds me – and himself – that at least we're not digging ditches. And neither are our office staff. But I get hives just imagining a job in which people constantly loom over you, derailing your thought process, sweetly asking if they can get help with "just" one

small thing *right now*, and they're quietly willing to press the matter because they know – it's embarrassing to say aloud, but impossible to dispute – that their work is surely more important than whatever else you're doing, particularly if you're helping who they think you're helping.

Fortunately, my behaviour has always been above reproach. The staff in my department's office love me, for my thoughtfulness, my patience, my endless good humour. But just in case: Brenda, Chris, Kim, Myriam, please let me take you to lunch. I don't have to come, if you'd rather.

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June-July 2008

Y is for Youth

by Alan MacEachern

I keep my office door largely bare but for a postcard of Canadian artist Joyce Weiland's "Reason over Passion," Trudeau's slogan stitched in bright colours on a quilt. The card is there partly for the amusement of colleagues, who know that my own passion sometimes wins over. It's there partly for me, as a reminder of the same thing. But it's there mostly for students who come to see me or are passing by. I want them to consider for a moment what they are doing at university, what parts about themselves they are trying to change and what parts they are trying to take further. I certainly don't think they should get serious about everything, but they should get serious about something, and doing so early gives them longer to succeed and a head start over many of their peers. But I don't kid myself. Neither did Weiland, whose "Reason over Passion" is a bedspread, after all.

Sometimes before giving a lecture I look around the classroom and wonder how many of the students have a part-time job or two. How many were drinking last night or already today. How many are in love or lust with the student in front of them or beside them. And how many will turn to Facebook or solitaire as soon as the class starts. It can be disconcerting, because long before the course started I visualized its entire arc, determining what students need to learn first, then next, then next, and I inevitably failed to take the students' actual lives into consideration. Instead, before meeting a single one of them, I'd imagined being carried off on their shoulders in April. It shouldn't be a surprise, but always is, when in the first class a student says she's taking the course because she has to, when at mid-term another says with exasperation that he has four other classes, you know, and when a few years later another says, "Didn't I have you for the Holocaust?" No, you didn't have me for the Holocaust.

The reason none of this should be a surprise is that faculty take for granted that students do not understand us. We know that most students don't have a good grasp of what our research entails or how it fits into our jobs, let alone anything about our administrative responsibilities. When a student visits my office, sees me seemingly at ease and somewhat slovenly, and says, "I wanna be a professor like you," I admit to being a little offended. The mistake that both professors and students make is assuming that we understand one another just by virtue of our daily proximity.

And yet when I look at my shelf of books about the state of higher education today, I see that many if not most of the authors – such as Derek Bok, Tom Pocklington, Allan Tupper, Elaine Showalter, Donald Kennedy, James Duderstadt and James Axtell – are from a small demographic of the campus community: late-career faculty, some of them emeritus. These professors believe that their long experience in academe makes them well-suited to discuss it – and of course they are right. But other viewpoints would also be welcome.

That's why I was interested to read Jeff Rybak's *What's Wrong with University: And How to Make it Work for You Anyway*. Mr. Rybak graduated from University of Toronto Scarborough in 2006, and so refreshingly promises a student version of the state of Canadian universities. I wanted to hear a young person describe what is and isn't working, how students adapt to the system, and what can be done to make things better. And to a degree, he delivers. For example, he offers a passionate attack of the student loan system, noting that in most other circumstances Canadian law does not allow a minor to sign a binding agreement: "You can't get a credit card, sign a cellular phone contract, or anything else, but you can sign yourself into thousands upon thousands of dollars of debt if it's for education." Mr. Rybak gives good advice on why not to take a bird course (its ease or your lack of commitment will make it difficult to get a grade higher than the students around you), why to use your university e-mail when contacting your prof (hot_monkey_love@hotmail.com will make you look like an idiot), and how to complain about marks (focus on the process rather than the outcome).

But overall, the book is weak. It is not really about what its title suggests, but rather why to care enough about university to get something out of it. As a result, it comes across as an apologia for some of the inanities and insanities of campus life. And instead of using much research or even his own academic experiences, the author relies on flabby, generic self-help writing: "Try something new. If that doesn't work, try something else. The important thing is to continue trying. As long as you are taking enough interest in your education that you're really working at it, things can't go far wrong. Just whatever you do, don't fall into the trap of resolving to 'try harder,' as though that decision alone is the answer to everything."

Still, the mere existence of Jeff Rybak's book is encouraging. If those who run universities today aren't listening to students, we won't understand their issues or needs. And education, like youth, will be wasted on the young.

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August-September 2008

Z is for Zugzwang

by Alan MacEachern

This spring, *The Walrus* ran "Failure to Fail," an article about "The search for the elusive LPFOCU – the Last Person to Flunk Out of a Canadian University." Author Jay Teitel gleefully tells of being unable to find a single student who failed out. There were those who dropped out, who were put on probation, who took more years to finish, sure, but no one who was actually made to leave.

In chess, a player is in zugzwang if he is obliged to move, but any move will result in disadvantage or loss. Canadian university students, it would seem, exist in bizarro-zugzwang, where no move results in loss, where things always ultimately work out.

Mr. Teitel speaks to students, administrators and professors across the country to find out why no one is flunking. Students tend to interpret it cynically, that every lost student means a loss of tuition and government funds for the university. In that calculation, poor students are the most valued students of all because they stay around longer than good ones. Administrators suggest that grades for entering university are so high today that the vast majority of university students are intellectually capable of it – and if not, the university has difficulty admitting that it either made a mistake accepting the student or that the student got worse while there. Professors describe themselves as powerless: students increasingly act entitled to the degree, the administration fears lawsuits and their own future is dependent on positive course evaluations, which in turn is dependent on giving good grades.

This last argument – that professors are forced to be pushovers because of job insecurity – infuriates me. I have long heard tenure-track folk in particular voice a concern that they must constantly walk on eggshells around students (and colleagues, chairs, deans, other scholars, etc.) for fear of what poor teaching evaluations or a negative letter might mean to their case for promotion. Books such as the recent Canadian study *Ivory Tower Blues*, which Mr. Teitel cites, give credence to this view. James E. Côté and Anton L. Allahar quote an American researcher that "Stringent graders, by virtue of their low course enrolments and lower course evaluations, are less likely to receive tenure, salary increases and promotions. Professors know this and respond by raising their grades to meet student expectations."

But this is a cross-border bait-and-switch, because Canadian academics have a dirty little secret: almost everyone gets tenure. We all know anecdotally that the tenure rate is a lot higher in Canada than it is in the United States. It is quite hard to find the actual statistics, though, perhaps because it's not the sort of thing that either administration or unions care to trumpet. The University of Toronto, however, states that its tenure rate is over 95 percent, compared with 45 to 60 percent in comparable U.S. public research universities. And U of T is one of our strongest universities; the rate at others may well be higher.

I'm not arguing that the Canadian rate should be lower (now that I have tenure), or that people are getting tenure who don't deserve it. I'm not arguing that faculty don't face other pressures to pass students or inflate grades. I'm just arguing that for a Canadian academic to use fear of not acquiring tenure as an excuse for doing or not doing almost anything is an act of cowardice. It is disgraceful to mask privilege as persecution. We need to be honest enough to admit that if Canadian university students are in bizarro-zugzwang, so are Canadian professors.

Since getting tenure is simple, so are my top ten tips on getting tenure:

10. Get a tenure-track job.

9. Remember that nobody is an expert on getting tenure. If they went up once, their experience is unique. If they went up two or three times, you don't want to

listen to them.

8. In your first year, no matter how busy you are, say 'yes' to everything: invitations for coffee, nominations for committees, everything. You will learn a lot.

7. Tell no one that you're saying 'yes' to everything.

6. Balance teaching, research and service. Balance is what got you here.

5. Update your CV whenever you accomplish anything. It keeps your tenure file organized and, more importantly, it's encouraging.

4. Build a list of scholars who know and like your research.

3. Ask how you're doing. If your university doesn't provide a yearly pre-tenure meeting with your dean (it should), request one anyway.

2. Keep a written record of everything. If you're so worried about getting tenure that you read a list of tips about it, maybe your file really is weak. So start building an appeal now. Or better yet, make your file stronger.

1. Don't give tenure a thought. Just as getting a degree should be the least of a student's accomplishments, so getting tenure should be the least of yours. Don't let the need for tenure define these early years in any way. There are so many ways to fashion an academic career, so figure out which one you want, and make it happen.

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