



**“Together We’re Smarter”
Collaborative and
Community Based Pedagogies
in the Humanities**

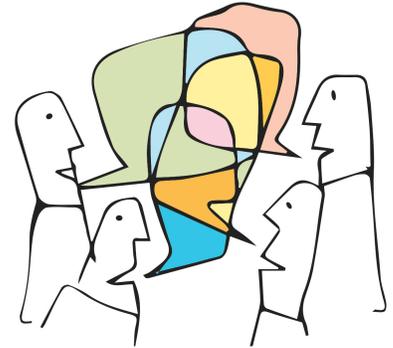
**Lecture for the Herbert and Leota Teaching Award
Andrew Wilson
29th August, 2018
Mount Allison University**

I begin by thanking the Tucker family for supporting teaching at Mount Allison with such a generous award. In creating this award you have also created such a wonderful sense of community around teaching and I know many of us look forward to opportunities to talk about and swap ideas on teaching and learning on days just like this. I’d like to thank my peers for being so generous with their letters and for selecting me for this great honour. A special thank you to my colleagues in the department of Religious Studies, including the honorary ones, for providing such a wonderfully collaborative environment in which to teach and learn. Indeed, I have wonderful colleagues across the university. I have had such stimulating creative experiences collaborating with colleagues from Music and Fine Arts, from Biology and Geography and English and others besides. This is one of the things that makes Mount Allison such a great place to be. I’m looking forward to more of these opportunities, particularly those unexpected and unconventional partnerships that emerge from time to time.

“Together we’re smarter.” This is such a simple idea. Seemingly self evident, it is hardly a point of contention in the literature. Nonetheless, much work has been done to test, verify and develop collaborative learning practices in education, not to mention the work done in the spheres of business and social development. There are many formative studies on collaborative learning in higher education including Johnson, Johnson and Smith’s article from the mid 90s, which outlines the basics of the practice.¹ Collaborative learning produces higher quality results, individuals emerge from the experience with significant skills development. Critical thinking, creativity and problem solving all receive a boost in the collaborative process as do communication skills and self awareness. More recent scholarship has extended these principles to more fully consider the role of the instructor, to account for the context of the learning environment, the intricacies of the social and ideological factors at play and, the impact of ever advancing technological developments.

¹ David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson, and Karl A. Smith *From Teaching and Learning in the College Classroom*, ed. Kenneth A. Felman and Michael B. Paulsen (Needham Heights: Ginn Press, 1994): 317-324.

Rather than take you on a tour through this literature, a journey with sights no doubt familiar to many, I'd like to propose a different path. I'd like to invite you to join me as I plot my own course through some of the issues that arise from collaborative learning, but with a specific focus on how this kind of learning plays out in our local context—at Mount Allison University, situated as it is in the small town of Sackville, in rural New Brunswick. These are stories that focus on praxis and experience in order to ground an expansive vision in ways that demonstrate its potential for transformation and further exploration in our community. I have no doubt that “together we're smarter” is something we can more or less agree upon, but what I wonder about is the extent to which this simple phrase, when situated in our specific context, begins to open up to a remarkable complexity and richness. This is an opening that begins to speak to a renewed pedagogical appreciation for relationship, community and deeply forged connections.



Story #1: RELG1661: RELIGION AND POPULAR CULTURE

My first story begins with a problem. A little over 10 years ago, I had just started teaching a large first year course: Religion and Popular Culture—it remains a large course with enrollment ranging from 110-175. This course is an introduction to the discipline of Religious Studies with the advantage that students are already familiar with at least half the materials. Indeed, students often bring to this class a remarkable expertise in elements, themes and issues associated with popular culture.

As a capstone project for this course, students take an example of religion in a popular culture context and provide contextualization and analysis. This is an opportunity for students to bring the tools of religious studies to bear on examples from their experience of the culture around them. These projects have always proved to be a course highlight, demonstrating a high level of engagement, creativity and analytical complexity. While the students are creative, enthusiastic and motivated, this is admittedly a very demanding assignment to set for a first year class. It is difficult for students who are straight out of high school and who are not used to thinking about the connections between religion and culture in this way. At the same time, the kind of theoretical approaches used in this class can prove just as disorienting for more experienced students not familiar with the complex theoretical lenses Religious Studies employs.

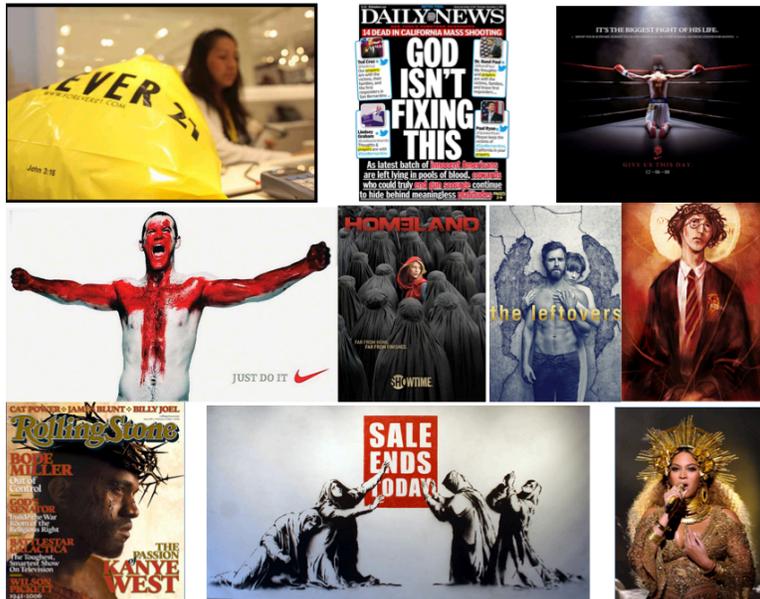
The assignment involves students identifying a religious theme or image in the context of popular culture, providing the contemporary context, researching the historical background and undertaking an ideological reading that accounts for traditional and non-traditional inflections of meaning. When done well, this assignment demonstrates the capacity of religion to both remain connected with its traditional roots while simultaneously participating in cultural discourses far removed from its sacred origins.

The initial cycles of this course yielded some very strong assignments—creative, original, insightful—but others lacked sophistication and analytical depth, some resembling “show and tell” more than academic analysis.

Despite the unevenness, I felt it was worth keeping an assignment that clearly had students highly engaged and eager to investigate even if at the same time posing a significant challenge. What I needed to do was to create the conditions whereby students would receive the support they needed to meet this challenge along with the tools they were missing. I wanted to create a situation where the overall quality of the projects would be high and the overall skill level of each student would be strengthened in its own right. A major advantage I had was the unevenness of the class composition. Mount Allison’s Liberal Arts context means that these large first year classes consist of first through fourth level students with varied representation from all three faculties. What if I brought together this assortment of abilities and levels of expertise in ways that assisted students with such a challenging project? And so, I re-introduced this assignment as a group project.

Group work. This was not a popular move. It wasn’t popular when I was an undergraduate and it remains unpopular. Indeed, in the first year I tried this, there was practically an all-out rebellion. Students taking the class were not at all happy to discover that an assignment that had been well reported by their peers had become something involving “forced” collaboration. And they couldn’t even pick their groups! In developing this assignment and shifting to a group context, I worked with Eileen Herteis and university’s Purdy Crawford Teaching Centre (PCTC). Eileen’s advice was that it should be a group assignment for the whole class (no exceptions or options for individual projects). She also advised that the groups should be allocated, not self-selected, where some more established students benefit from their advanced experience and connections. Finally, on Eileen’s advice, I supplied the class with some literature on the advantages of group work and studies that spoke to the increased quality of work produced from the collaborative process.

And we were indeed smarter. In the last cycle of this class, students produced projects on the subversive British graffiti artist Banksy; Beyonce as a quasi-divine womanist icon; gun violence and the *#thoughtsandprayers* movement; religious secular devotion in the context of sports and the ideological implications of



religion and consumerism.

Over the years I have continually developed and refined this project. I survey students in the first week, group them according to their experience and interests and involve them in class activities where they can get some practice working together. Along the way, I encourage them to get to know each other.

What are your skills?

Where is your experience?

Who can best do what?

When it comes time to work on the assignment, I recommend they don't divide the project into six identical pieces but to play to their strengths as a group.

Of course, things are not always smooth sailing, and students still insist they hate group work, but the feedback from the course and the quality of the assignments themselves tell a different story. While students maintain their dislike for group work, they nonetheless report overwhelmingly positive experiences of the collaborative process associated with this project and consistently rank doing the assignment as one of the highlights of the course. Moreover, from my perspective, the assignments demonstrate consistently higher levels of critical (and personal) engagement and theoretical acuity. Despite the initial grumbling, grouping students into these unconventional partnerships seemed to have paid off handsomely.

While I take the student's resistance to group work seriously, the literature speaks about resistance to collaborative learning as a perennial issue. A common explanation for this resistance is attributed to a lack of experience working collaboratively. Students do not appear to have been formed in ways that prepare them for this kind of learning. This may be why the most common complaint I hear from students is that they are concerned their grades will be pulled down by the weakest members of their groups and they would rather just do things themselves where they know they have more control and can succeed. I wonder if this attitude comes from an education system that assesses students competitively? Students are routinely ranked in relation to their peers, their range of opportunities is dependent on those rankings and individual effort, even moral character, is associated with their success. While many students know how to succeed in this system, it is a system that may not be preparing them well to learn and to work collaboratively in their future years.

The limitations of such a system are brought into relief when set alongside recent research into 21st Century learning competencies. This research proposes that future success will not be dependent on a certain content or type of knowledge that is separated into traditional disciplinary areas. Future jobs will rely instead on competencies and aptitudes that involve a complex convergence of skills, knowledge, cultural and social indicators and attitudes. These competencies have been variously parsed but they are sometimes listed as the 7C's of 21st Century education:

1. Critical Thinking,
2. Communication,
3. Collaboration,
4. Creativity and Innovation,
5. Character,
6. Culture and Ethical Citizenship,
7. Computer and digital technologies.

The basic idea is that with the rapid pace of social, cultural and technological change, educators cannot discern with much precision “what” students need to know in order to flourish in the 21st century. However, given the character and dynamics of our post digital world, it does seem possible to identify certain skills, insights and attitudes that will be useful for figuring things out and navigating their way through their future.

Interestingly, these competencies are not understood as theories or frameworks, such as could be learned in the abstract. They tend to develop most profoundly when learners are in meaningful relationship with their community and connected in meaningful ways with the subject of their learning. They are as hands-on and practical as much as they are intricate abstractions. They play out most fully in the experience of learners, in every-day interactions and experiences more clearly than in a textbook or on a flowchart. Hence, learning emerges from the location of relationship so that relationship and connection become central to learning rather than as accidental or incidental.

So what does this all mean? This relational dimension to learning, the connection to the “every-day” and the importance of meaningful connections may explain why the assignment in my class remains popular despite its classification as “group-work.” It could be that while “group work” remains as unpopular as it always has, there’s another level of interaction going on here. Could it be that in this experience, students are finding something that they are really connected to (i.e. pop culture), they are bringing to bear a number of these competencies, collaboration in particular, and they are meeting this challenge in the context of relationship with similarly invested peers. Maybe this is why the learning is reported as so impactful and deep. Taking things back to our “together, we’re smarter” catch cry, in this case, students seem less concerned with the grade they receive (although that’s usually pretty strong) and more concerned to report on the “together” part of the equation.

Of course, when I use the word “together,” I’m not just talking about the students as



though somehow i am unaffected by what happens in the classroom.

Together

The assignments completed by these students from my first year class were not just important indicators of *their* academic success in the collaborative process, they also played a significant role in the development of my own research program and interests. My research involves the analysis of religion and culture with a specific focus on the ways in which traditional Christian meanings continue to circulate in contemporary cultural contexts. This course became an important gateway into the complex cultural dynamics of our time and demonstrated time and again, the elasticity of Religious traditions to shape and be shaped by our times. It also provided me an opportunity to reflect on my own collaborative relationships and the ways in which these contribute to my scholarship and my approach to teaching and learning. I have had the good fortune to work with many wonderful people over the past number of years from book binding with Janine Rogers and Kirsty Bell, to writing about horror and penance with Deborah Wills, to joint presentations about education to government and business leaders with Mike Fox, to integrating pedagogy, music and musicians with the Sackville Early Music Festival and Linda Pearse. All of these partnerships have fed and nourished my appreciation of my discipline and my scholarly perspectives.

My favourite comment from my religion and popculture class is always the one that goes some thing like: "I'll never look at pop culture the same way the again." Each year I teach this course it is different and insight into the materials is always inflected differently by the student perspectives. By the end, I always find myself sharing these sentiments, that things can always look different.

Who are my collaborators? Certainly the students in this class given the way they have influenced the trajectory of my research. But I can also add my colleagues at the university. My colleagues from my academic society scatter these connections across the globe. But there are also those people I work with in my community outreach projects. Certainly in a small town like Sackville, sometimes these can be the same people. I always tell those who ask what it's like to live in a small town that sometimes my most productive meetings occur when I take my son to a friend's birthday party. The fruits of collaboration can ripen in the unlikeliest locations.

Story #2: SS2020

A second story: A few years ago, I found myself sitting around a kitchen table talking about the K-12 schools system in our community. I have two children in the system and had been involved for many years with their education in one way or another. It was the summer of 2015, Dorchester school had just fought off closure and the



Provincial Policy 409, which triggers automatic feasibility studies for schools at less than 50% capacity, had just come into effect. With the knowledge that the Sackville family of schools, given their declining enrolments and crumbling infrastructure, would certainly attract attention before too long, we felt it was time to get more involved. It was around that time that a small group of parents and community members took up the challenge of championing education in Sackville. It was a grassroots movement, an independent collection of “unconventional partnerships.” Initially, it was intended as a way of being proactive rather than defensive in the face of impending change. This movement, now known as *Sackville Schools 2020*, has evolved into something far more expansive. We started small, but have come to represent a broad segment of the local community. We have taken stock, consulted widely, and developed a vision of education that emerges from the uniqueness of Sackville. As a group, we have been both surprised and delighted that the vision for education that has emerged from our work championing Sackville as a learning community has been so widely embraced by government (local, provincial and federal), the business sector, education specialists, researchers and practitioners and of course the many and varied stakeholders from the local community, including the students themselves. *Sackville Schools 2020* is not just encouraging the development of healthy and modern learning facilities, we are promoting a vision of an integrated educational community model, one that takes up and builds upon the reality that is life in a small town, a life that is full of interconnections, boundary crossing moments and unconventional partnerships. The essence of this vision is one that recognizes the scope of learning as unbounded and pervasive.



SS2020 is developed from a vision of education that seeks to present Sackville as an integrated learning community. Experiential learning is of course a big part of this, but it doesn't end there; the vision is focused on and challenges the structures that shape and make sense of those experiences. SS2020 understands that learning occurs in this community, amidst the many and varied relationships, locations and experiences one has living in a small town. In this model, the relationships that make collaboration possible become the context for learning. In practice, this means acknowledging, valuing and building upon those relationships in enriching and life giving ways. Students go from building sheds in a school woodworking shop, to building low-income housing for their

neighbors. From trying out recipes in a school kitchen to cooking community meals

under the guidance of a red-seal chef. From playing outside as a treat to learning outside as a default. It means that Town, school, university, business and non-profit are all bound together and united by the task of teaching and learning. The community is the classroom. It's a big idea and radical in its own way. But what I learned as part of SS2020 is that the attractiveness of this vision lies in the reality that these experiences and the community dynamics that sustain them are already a large part of life and learning in Sackville. It turns out Sackville provides a wonderful model of how “together” and “smarter” can coalesce in rich, enlivening ways.



www.rpeace.org

Story #3: R-PEACE

My final story is one that is only just beginning. Most recently, my interests with collaboration, with “outside the box” opportunities and with a conviction that learning happens in relationship, have led to more formal teaching and research partnerships. Along with three other colleagues, Erin Steuter, Mike Fox and Fiona Black, we are about to launch a new Research Centre at the university: R-PEACE (Research

Partnerships in Education and Community Engagement). The idea behind this centre is to bring together a number of strands so as to create a fixed location for research into what can at times seem quite abstract—i.e. this is a key opportunity for praxis.

Learning Lab

For example, a fundamental component of our centre will be a “learning lab” where we will be researching learning practices, particularly as they are effected by flexible space and “analog” technology.

For this we will be working with partners from Udm and the Department of Education, with the help of educational furniture designers and researchers, *Steelcase*. *Steelcase* has furnished this lab with state of the art equipment that facilitates collaboration and flexible learning. The furniture, which includes various chairs tables and instructional technology, can be configured in multiple combinations and arranged and re-arranged within minutes. The idea is that refashioning the material structures of learning, has an impact on the kind and quality of leaning that takes place.

Steelcase



We envisage this lab space as a location where we can investigate some of the

boundary-crossing “deep learning” activities and strategies that are taking place in the K-12 system. In some ways, the public schools are steps ahead of us and there is much good work taking place. We will be working closely with key educators, trialing, implementing and sharing strategies from the K-12 system.

The initial goal of R-Peace is to develop practices around the C21 competencies and to map their application to post-secondary contexts, particularly in the Humanities. Investigating the potential for the Humanities classroom in all of this, let alone the way Religious Studies as a discipline might engage with C21 pedagogies, is something rich with possibility. While there is a reasonable amount of research connected to the STEM disciplines and C21 competencies, the application of these models to the Humanities is less worked though.

This lab space is also important for its location as a pivot point between various groups and partners in the community. So, for example, in the Fall semester, each Wednesday afternoon, a group of students will be taking their coursework from the learning lab to the Marshview Middle School as part of a new UNST course. The middle school will be divided into a number of small groups, according to interest and cutting across the grade-levels. Students will participate in activities determined and directed by the middle school students. In preparation for this, we surveyed the middle school students last Fall and interestingly, the top contenders involve wanting to be outside more and learning how to cook. These Wednesday afternoon activities will be an opportunity to fit curricular goals around student led activities where university students provide leadership and mentorship in ways that investigate how learning follows connection and how competencies are developed and expressed. I also wonder, if like my students and their aversion to group work, there will be a similar dimension to the experience of the Middle school students, many of whom are “too cool for school.” From my disciplinary perspective, I will be very interested to know how values feature in these activities. How does this kind of practical, engaged learning, connect with a sense of one’s place, of one’s identity and purpose? Indeed, there are many ways university students will be able to engage according to their disciplinary interests and indeed, registered students come from across the university. This “pilot” is also significant because it is an important way that the Anglophone East School District is implementing its “deep learning” strategies (another way of organizing 21st C learning). The District is holding a regional conference in Moncton in October where this project will no doubt feature.

In these and other ways, the lab serves as an important junction for community collaboration and brings further resonance to the “Together” in “together we’re smarter.” In this example, it becomes clear that the learning community includes students (university and middle school), faculty, teachers in the schools system, and the various interests these players bring from their families, communities and experiences. In other words, community based learning is deep and far reaching.

Partnerships

Aside for the significance of the lab, The R-Peace centre allows us to form important partnerships with a range of experts and research groups. In our lab, we are working with the UdM and the Ministry of Education, but we also have important research partnerships with a range of organizations from the local schools, non-profits and educational consultants both here and across the country, to Harvard's "education re-design lab" in the Graduate School of Education.



At first glance, the partnership with Harvard may seem like a genuinely unconventional partnership between a small Maritime, liberal arts university and one of the world's most widely known and storied institutions. And not unconnected, rich in resources. But the reach of our lab and our constellation of unlikely connections shows the reality of the intentions of the project. The "education re-design lab" is particularly interested in our vision and our community. R-Peace and our links to the community, including via SS2020, provide Harvard a living laboratory of their own.

For example, the "re-design" lab is especially interested in the extent to which 21st Century pedagogical models reach underprivileged students in the system. Sackville's "all in" education system and our relative isolation mean that the kind of streaming that commonly occurs in other urban centres occurs here to a much lesser extent. In turn, R-Peace and Sackville benefit from Harvard's connections and resources as well as the research perspectives and insights they bring as a result of their expansive reach. This partnership, however, unlikely, is then mutually beneficial and organically fitting in a way that benefits us both. Unconventional to be sure, but it turns out to be eminently well-suited.

"Together we're smarter" Our local stories and experiences can help unpack this simple statement in complex ways. In the word "together," we see relationships between students, faculty, university, school, town, business and partnerships that criss-cross our local community and push outward across the Province, country and even further afield. Understanding what it means to be "smarter" is also modified by our experience. This is not just about collaborative learning, but about a whole list of competencies that enhance and extend the kind of traditional learning we are so familiar with. This is learning that we can understand as a true relational pedagogy that ideally guides students towards an intellectual, academic and perhaps even a personal flourishing. The reality is that these conversations have been happening in the Humanities for a long time but they are now animated by new questions. How do we bring together tradition and innovation? What is the place and purpose of knowledge and disciplinary content? What does it mean to have a relational pedagogy? These are all important questions and the Humanities has a crucial role in formulating an

adequate response.

“Together we’re Smarter”

“Together *we’re* smarter.” I think the most important parts of this simple phrase are actually contained in the unassuming contraction of the word “we’re”: **“we are.”**

These words draw in the broad relational implications of “together” and the similarly broad sense of learning we get from the concept of “smarter” and locate them in an important pivotal point. This contraction, this claim, *we are*, is as central to the concept of relational pedagogy as it is literally central to the phrase itself. It links and conjoins the diverse partnerships of learner and teacher, researcher and collaborator, student and citizen.

This is an expanded vision of what pedagogy is about and what it can accomplish. Here, learning is individually, collectively and socially, transformational.