Guest Scholars Project

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The Issue
The idea for this project probably came from recognizing many times that a student knew more than I did about some matter which came up in class discussion, and could make valuable contributions to the teaching and learning process. As well, like many teachers, I occasionally brought visitors to class to share their knowledge. The Guest Scholars project, conducted in 2008, was an experiment in accessing the expertise of student scholars in a more structured way, to enrich teaching and enhance learning.

The Project
The grant was awarded to support the payment of stipends of $100 to students who visited my classes to present a perspective on, or background to, the material we were studying. The purposes were to add the guest scholar’s particular expertise to the class and to provide a professional development opportunity for the guest scholar to present ideas to a different audience. My first step was to advertise for guest scholars on the university e-mail and also to write letters to department heads and others requesting suggestions for students in certain areas I had identified as possibilities. The first guest scholar came from this process; the remaining three came from a more serendipitous process—one was met at a department committee meeting and the other two were introduced by a student in another class. I interviewed the prospective guest scholars; once we agreed to go ahead, we set up topics and times for the class visits.

The presentation in Humanities 260 was: “A Guaranteed Annual Income for Canada—Could It Be Done Today?” This talk was given by honours Economics student John Murney on 11 March 2008. His discussion provided some valuable real-world context for our discussion of Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward, a utopian novel in which guaranteed income is the basis for social arrangements. The comments by the students in the class were very positive. As a result of the questions and discussion which followed John’s presentation, he reported that he gained a clearer idea of the importance of work incentives as an aspect of the total problem of guaranteed income.

The topic for English 374 was “‘Why Can’t He Make Anything He Wants?’: Philip Roth’s Conception of the Writer,” relating to Roth’s famous story “The Conversion of the Jews.” English graduate student Benjamin Salloum presented his talk on 1 November 2008. Comments by the class were very positive. Several students suggested the use of visual aids for future presentations. Ben reported afterward that focusing his knowledge of Roth for a different audience from his thesis committee, and looking at an early story rather than the later novels, added “a considerable amount of nuance” to his thesis project.

Students in English 212 were given a dramatization of Lady Bracknell’s interview of Jack Worthing as a potential son-in-law, from Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest. The guest scholars were Ash-Lee Hommy and Jason Fisher, third year students in the Fine Arts Theatre program. The actors presented the scene and then stayed for a discussion with the class:
what goes into preparing a performance, how are lines memorized and how does theatrical study differ from the literary approach to texts? Student comments were almost all very positive on the performance, although there were some suggestions that costumes would have been preferable to the informal workshop approach. Two students suggested that the event could have been better prepared for in terms of an agenda or list of discussion questions for afterward--this was my oversight as the class teacher. The student actors commented afterwards on the learning opportunity for them in presenting a single scene yet keeping the characters true, and on the benefits of considering the literary side of script work along with the performance side. This echoed some class comments that the two should be brought together and this type of class event should happen more often.

Results
Dr. Vianne Timmons, President of the University of Regina, recommended submission of a report on the project to The Teaching Professor newsletter. The article appeared in the May 2009 issue. I felt that the experiment went very well and I think the students in the three classes agreed. One of the broader implications may be that there is often a great deal of intelligence which is not utilized as effectively as it could be, a point which applies not only to universities but to other types of organizations. If the intelligence and the creativity of students could be channeled by means of a university-wide bureau for guest scholars, which would at least provide a passive listing or perhaps provide a matching service, then some professors could choose to enrich their classes with this student expertise and the guest scholars, whether future academics or not, would have opportunities to teach their ideas to others. Experienced teachers know that to be responsible for teaching a subject is one of the best ways to learn it.