

7-5-2012

Leadership and Pedagogy in the Arts and Humanities: An Interview with Alison Conway and Joel Faflak

Diana Samu-Visser
dsamuvis@uwo.ca

Nina Budabin McQuown
npb.mcquown@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wordhoard>

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Samu-Visser, Diana and Budabin McQuown, Nina (2012) "Leadership and Pedagogy in the Arts and Humanities: An Interview with Alison Conway and Joel Faflak," *The Word Hoard*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 9.
Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wordhoard/vol1/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Word Hoard by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact kmarsha1@uwo.ca.

The *Word Hoard*

/wɔːrd/hɔːrd/ n. 1. A journal open to all Arts and Humanities scholars.

Leadership and Pedagogy in the Arts and Humanities: An Interview with Alison Conway and Joel Faflak by Diana Samu-Visser and Nina Budabin McQuown

I: Introduction

The student strike in Quebec has brought to the foreground the place of arts and humanities education in society, and its significance in today's world. Questions regarding the practical application of such education are timely and of great urgency, as students and citizens across Canada re-evaluate and re-articulate their positions on the value of post-secondary education, particularly in the liberal arts. As a Masters student new to University of Western Ontario, I came to the topic of leadership and pedagogy with far more questions in hand than answers or suggestions. As such, my response to Rita Gardiner takes the form of an interview: a space in which I was able to pose questions about the creation of citizens in arts and humanities classrooms, and about the discourses of pedagogy that are employed, both theoretically and practically, as part of this process. Over the course of preparing for this interview, and after conducting it, I was constantly reminded of the unique position that faculties of arts and humanities occupy in terms of the production of citizens. In Gardiner's reading of Arendt, the uniqueness of individual perspectives is filtered through the social world (66). However, one of the goals of the arts and humanities is to produce citizens capable of responding to the discourses that comprise

these filters, and of approaching them with caution, skepticism, and the intention to disrupt. Over the course of my studies, I have become increasingly aware of the ethical questions that can accompany such critical aware-ness, particularly those which regard inevitable tensions between theories of leadership, knowledge, and resistance, and their employment both inside and outside of the classroom. Preparing for this interview, I hoped to discuss how instructors navigate or mitigate these tensions in a practical setting while maintaining leadership roles in the classroom and in the university more broadly, as well as the extent to which their fields of research influence their approaches to knowledge, leadership, and citizenship.

Professors Alison Conway and Joel Faflak teach in the Department of English at University of Western Ontario. Dr. Conway's research interests include Restoration and eighteenth-century literature, feminist theory, and the history of the novel, and Dr. Faflak's include literary theory and criticism, Romanticism, psycho-analysis, pop culture, and the film musical. Both are award-winning leaders in the classroom.

II: Interview

Diana Samu-Visser: Before we start talking about leadership in the classroom, it seems important to discuss this in the context of the arts and humanities, talking about who you are leading, and to what you are leading them. What do you see as the goal of humanities education at the post-secondary level?

Joel Faflak: Me first? You?

Alison Conway: I see the goal of arts and humanities teaching to be developing critical thinking, obviously, but more generally, allowing students to become cultural leaders, to be thinking deeply about complex questions relating to culture, in particular, but also to society and politics more generally.

JF: I always think of the fact that everything that we are studying, whether it is a literary text or a film or a television series or a painting—it is art, it is the literary. It removes us from reality or puts us on remove from reality. At some level, that is an area of illusion, but because it is an area of illusion it asks us to step aside from reality and think about the designs that we make on reality, and it also allows us a forum for speculation about reality that is absolutely crucial.

DSV: Do you think that humanities education is essentially about citizenship? Do you see yourselves as creating better citizens with the work that you do in the classroom, and, more broadly, the university?

JF: I think so, absolutely. In some sense, there is the common thread that the humanities are always under threat. We are having to respond to more empirically-based disciplines like the sciences, medicine, business, and law. That is a profound ability, once

again, to be able to engage with the world around us in a different kind of way, to step aside from it, and to think about the relationship among all of those fields, and therefore to create a well-rounded citizen in every sense of that word.

AC: And I think, particularly, we can think about ourselves as guardians of culture—art, literature, and the various philosophies that are arts-and-humanities-based—but the citizenry question is, for me, more generally related to communication, modes of being in the world, ways of articulating values that are counter to, say, corporate values, and maintaining those values in the face of intense pressure to capitulate to corporate logic.

JF: And if I could add one thing to that—because, Alison, our fields are closely related historically—one of the things that defines the field that we study is the rise of feeling, the rise of sensibility, the rise of empathy and sympathy, and the fact that one's response to the world is not just governed by neo-liberal-capitalist paradigms. It is also about how we feel about the world, as well as how we think about the world, which disturbs people, the introduction of feeling. And thinking about a feeling citizen is a problematic area, but it is absolutely necessary.

DSV: How do you see your subjects and courses fitting into that mandate or that idea of creating citizens?

AC: Well, I have a course that I teach—and I enjoy teaching very much—on women and money, and I think parents probably get very excited, thin-king, “My daughter's going to learn how to get ahead in the world in a course on women and money.” But actually it is much more about understanding women's relation to money historically, to the question

of sexual equality and the language of economics, to the ways in which historical women have negotiated economic realities governing their lives, and attending to the political consequences of economic disparities between men and women. For me, it is a way of empowering women. I have only taught women in the class; it becomes a forum for us to talk about feelings of vulnerability, and both tangible and intangible realities and representations and fantasies that surround the issue of money.

JF: My field is Romanticism, so it is traditionally defined by the French Revolution (1789) and a world where the political possibilities seemed endless, a world defined by an intense idealism, although that idealism starts long before that in the Enlightenment, of course. The world becomes open in a certain kind of way in 1789; it is an arbitrary marker, but the changes were profound, and therefore people were open to the idea of people as citizens, the work of imagination, the work of thinking and being in the world in a profoundly different way than they had thought about it before, and, at the same time, confronting the fact that the world was open to all kinds of possibilities. The world became a far more contingent place, a far more arbitrary place, and in many ways a far more chaotic place open to an awareness of catastrophe and history—which I think speaks immediately to where we are right now in time.

DSV: Related to that question, ideally, how would you like your students' lives to be different as a result of the ideas that they encounter in your classrooms and in courses like these?

AC: We want them to look at reality slant, that is to say, to be able to see things not as natural or givens

but always to be critically engaged. Not necessarily negatively engaged or set against, but simply aware of the terms that are governing their lives, the historical roots of those terms, and the affective feelings that are attached to them, rather than simply moving on automatic pilot through their lives. Students will often say they come in from high school really steeped in clichés about human existence, about the social realities they have learned in their families, and they come away from university much more aware of the antecedents of those realities and representational practices associated with them. They appreciate having that sense of perspective. That is what I hope they take away: some kind of critical distance and perspectives on the worlds they inhabit.

JF: And contrary to the idea that it is a world in constant change and constant flux, I think the impact of what happens in the classroom—and I was thinking about this reading the Gardiner article—our actions and our thoughts as we put them into action in the classroom have, I hope, a significant impact on our students. We should not expect that impact to play itself out immediately, and we should not expect the work of education in terms of how it changes their thoughts and feelings to be immediate. It is, in some people, but one of the other profound aspects of what we do in the classroom is when someone comes back to you twenty years after, which I am now old enough to be able to say, and says, “There was that time in the classroom when you said this,” and I think to myself, I would have had no idea that I was impacting that student at the time. The delay of education is extremely important in a time when we are being asked to create more immediate results out of our education and out of the work that we do in the classroom. It is important

to notice that there is also a delay, a “kickback,” and that has to be respected.

DSV: Yes, but at the same time, that is one of the ways in which the arts and humanities really come under fire: by not having demonstrable, empirical results, or when they are measured, they are measured in ways that do not necessarily reflect the benefits in terms of creating the effect that these discourses have on students as citizens and as leaders. *The Word Hoard* article to which this interview is a response problematizes theories of authentic leadership that focus on a leader’s self-knowledge, and their ability to live and lead according to moral standards that are an outgrowth of life experiences. For professors, this seems to be a particularly relevant idea. Scholars spend their time researching particular power structures. It leads, for lack of a better way to put it, to a great many options for how to live ethically, they then get up day after day and perform that knowledge for a classroom full of students. How responsible do you feel to live by the theories you study?

JF: There is always a conflict, always a tension, and I think we discuss this as colleagues all the time. On one hand, you want to be an authority in the classroom because you have worked very hard as a scholar to internalize a certain set of ideas and to process them, to theorize them, in your own way, and you want to parlay that to your students—you want to impart that to them, I should say. You don’t want to impose it on them, either, and therefore you want to be open to what it is they are doing in the classroom that is a response to the work that you do. But I think to not be able to set a kind of “authoritative precedence” in terms of relaying that self-knowledge, as Gardiner talks about and as Arendt talks about—I think that would be a missed opportunity and,

actually, a failed responsibility on our part. But that is only the starting point; it is important for us to then be empathetic to what is happening to that knowledge in the classroom and what students are doing with it, and being open to the fact that they may absolutely resist what it is that we are doing in the classroom, and that is really hard.

AC: I have always taught Socratically, so I am not a lecturer and I never will be one, and increasingly I am moving away from that model of teaching on principle. Not because people don’t do it very well, but because I don’t find it speaks to what I think the ethics of teaching should be. So, for example, I taught a course on women and the Enlightenment last fall, and the students found the philosophical readings for that quite intimidating, but I modelled to them both my own process of self-discovery in relation to the material and also the fact that eighteenth-century women were themselves engaged with the “heavy hitters” of philosophy: the men who were publicly acknowledged for their philosophical work. [These women] were able to speak meaningfully to those dialogues and contribute to them. Students had study questions for each class and they started each session by writing on one of those questions in class. Because we started with their encounter with the text, rather than with mine, students became confident about their ability to navigate the text on their own.

DSV: That structure sounds like it creates a really interesting dialogue between theory and practice that you may not get in other courses specifically. Do you project that sense of responsibility into the classroom? Do you make your students aware of it? I know that, having taken a course with you [JF], you try and encourage us to be self-conscious, and you

relate that back to yourself. Do you think that that's important for educators and instructors to do in the classroom?

JF: I think it's really crucial. Picking up what Alison just said: it is a problem, and one sometimes gets criticized for introducing the personal dimension of one's scholarship, which is also introducing the personal dimension of one's life, into the reading of these texts and the difficulties that one encounters. I don't think that it should ever be gratuitous, but I think it's important for students to see exactly what the stakes of their coming to this work is, which is not just about reading the text, of course, it's still so much bigger than that. I'm a personal believer in introducing that personal dimension and making it work for the classroom, as I say, not just gratuitously, but otherwise a student doesn't understand that we are all students at some level...it's a transference situation, and it's never built around what you know. I don't really care about what students know or what I know, at some level, because that is a given, and one is secure in that. It's the gaps where one is frightened by what one does not know, and it's really important to address that tension in the classroom—not to make it the only thing, or the place where you stop, but you certainly make it a starting point.

AC: And I find that women faculty always face a different kind of challenge, that is, there will always be transference and there will always be issues of personhood and personality that I think don't attend students' engagement with male faculty in the same way. I feel that rather than ignore that, to just confront it and speak to it more directly, or as directly as I can—an example would be a student of mine saying, "Well, I always feel like I have to work harder for a woman because she's worked so hard to get where

she is. I need to work as hard to get where I am, and she's overcome setbacks." And I said, "Well, you know, but women faculty have had setbacks, too." The question is not to avoid setbacks; the question is to learn how to have a life that includes them and owns them, rather than dreaming this dream of mastery. So they will often project this dream of mastery onto women faculty as, "She must have superhuman powers," and that can be really disabling for them, as well. Trying to work with all of those narratives is, I find, productive, for the most part.

JF: And we're still really uncomfortable talking about the gendered dynamics of pedagogy: we still haven't got our mind around it.

DSV: You mentioned in your last answer that there was the potential to "get in trouble," so to speak, by bringing in gratuitously personal material into the classroom as an aid to education or as an aid to the classroom dynamic. Could you expand on that a little bit more, and maybe—without naming names—describing where, within the bureaucracy, you might encounter resistance to that?

JF: Sure, and I am not speaking to any one individual in particular, just to the general. I think it speaks to the idea that knowledge can be obtained and taught objectively, that's it's a kind of scientific body of knowledge and therefore is distant, it's out there: one simply imparts it. Therefore, it transfers itself between people objectively, scientifically, and then is separated, as it were, from one's personal life. For me, personally, the struggles that I have had to acquire my education, to learn what I have learned, and to give up, as Alison was just saying, the mastery one thinks one has—this is typical of what is expected of men in terms of mastering knowledge, of course, and

has been historically for the longest time. It is important to admit to oneself, and therefore admit to the other as part of the learning process, that you do not have that mastery, and bringing in the personal dimension, for me, is an inevitable part of that. It's unavoidable, and also, it really helps. You know, in business school, they use case histories to make knowledge more immediate for one's audience. I think that is what we are doing, on some level, when we bring in our personal histories. And one has to obey certain ethical boundaries, and so forth, and that's understood if you're a professional. That doesn't mean you can't bring that material in, or shouldn't.

AC: I would agree, and also, the extent to which we are people means that there will be moments in class when some kind of response breaks through that looks...I tend to cry when I read [Samuel Richardson's 1748 novel] *Clarissa*, and I try not to do it in front of my students, but I can become emotional about some textual representations, and to simply comment on that. Or, I laugh really hard at eighteenth-century jokes: I find them incredibly funny, and I talk to students about the fact that I didn't find them funny when I was eighteen, but I found them funny when I was twenty-five, so what had changed in those years, and what is it about those texts that either speaks to a more mature sense of humour, or that the experiences that I had between eighteen and twenty-five made me more open to the humour at a later moment? The fact that I'm laughing, and can't stop laughing because I keep thinking about the joke, it just becomes a teaching moment.

DSV: Absolutely. I think that's one of those opportunities where you get to lead by example by giving, not directly but indirectly, a sanction or kind of per-

mission that you're allowed to be moved by your work, and, in fact, you maybe should be moved by your work. That's part of the reason why we do things in the arts and humanities, because the material we work with is moving: it's funny, it's depressing, it's enlightening, it's joyful, and to give that kind of sanction in a classroom setting enables students to connect with the work a little bit more. So, I think that while it's not inherently a pedagogical strategy, it improves the dynamic of the classroom in a really significant way.

JF: We were talking earlier about this culture of leadership course that I will be doing this September, which is offered between arts and humanities and pitched specifically towards business students, and I have not been comfortable working outside the box of the traditional essay format and teaching writing skills and so forth and so on, and increasingly I am beginning to see that that's a really narrow point of view in terms of how knowledge is imparted to students, and how they evaluate their own work, and how they think of the quality of work that they are doing. So we are going to be incorporating a variety of service-learning-based assignments, one of which will be to adopt a case-study model that's incorporated essentially as part of the curriculum. I think about how that could be parlayed into thinking about the work of leadership, the morality and ethics of leadership, as it's represented through various works of literature, television, films, and so forth and so on; part of it will be to get them to go out into the community and interview a leader, someone who they see as being a leader and citizen in their community, whether it's London or their hometown or whatever, and to somehow incorporate that biographically into a roadmapping of that person's life, incorporated and thinking about it in terms of the lite-

rature that they've been reading and the criticism that they've been asked to read in the course. That's just one way in which learning will become hopefully be made to seem more relevant in terms of its connection to the outside world.

DSV: That's really interesting that there's going to be that link between arts and humanities and business. I'm not saying that there's an antagonism there, but there seems to be almost a competition where there's a real emphasis on business, and the arts and humanities has to justify its relevance as much to the world of business as anything else. I want to ask about another kind of dynamic, re-turning to the relationship between instructors and students. Part of the English professor's job in the classroom is to get students to question the power structures that create the discourses that you discuss, but because the classroom is a highly hierarchized space, when you walk into a classroom, you project a particular attitude towards that power that you yourselves hold as professors. What is your ideal power dynamic in the classroom, and what would you want that to accomplish, what would you want it to look like?

JF: I am a firm believer that a really effective teacher has to exude a certain kind of charisma, that is to say, one has to initially take charge of the class. This is less important in a smaller setting than it is in a class of a hundred, a hundred-and-forty, or two hundred students. One has to establish one's authority not in terms of lording it over students, but there has to be a focus of attention. You only have three hours per week with these students and you have to get a certain amount of information across. Having said that, it is also extremely important to self-critique that power dynamic and to make it apparent to students that one has a certain amount of knowledge

that one wants to impart to them, but that it is the starting point, and I always try to make that apparent, that I'm there for a reason. I tend to lecture more than Alison does, and I try to get away from that, because it is not that I don't want to hear what the students have to say: I do want to hear what the involvement is, and in courses I encourage people to interrupt me and stop me. Nonetheless, I think it's important to establish a centre of authority, and then immediately put that centre under erasure or think about what the stakes of that are. Because one cannot simply erase the fact that one is a tenured professor standing in front of a group of students for whom they are paying a lot of money to teach them, so one has to, I think, make all those things conscious to the group.

AC: My own approach is to assume the authority less in the performance of the teaching than in the scaffolding of the course. So, for example, everything about the course is laid out in advance. All the expectations are really clear about the work that is to be undertaken, the expectations of the work to be undertaken, but I move as quickly as possible away from the student as passive consumer because what I am going to tell them—or what I tell them that they are paying for—is not my knowledge, but the transformative experience of education. In order for that transformation to take place, they have to be participants, so they are not paying for me. They are paying for an environment in which they can grow and learn. The scaffolding absolutely has to be in place. There cannot be any room for subjectivity there, but I do say, "These are the tools that I'm going to give you. I will teach you the tools, and then you will use them, but you have to be a full partner in that." One of the things that I have noticed at Western is that students tend to be more passive, even at

graduation, than I would hope. So, for me, I'm teaching first year English next year, and the entire goal of the year is to create really active students who feel committed to their learning as something that is their project, an investment in themselves, not something they need to do to get a piece of paper or something you need to do to get a certain grade in my class, and as much as possible, I am going to make that be their responsibility. The first essay, they will have comments [from me], and we will have talked about what the expectations in the grading rubric for the paper will be, but then they will come in and we will discuss together what the grade on that paper is going to be based on their sense of my comments. A lot of students don't even read comments; they just look at the number and then they feel either frustration or elation depending on what they've received.

DSV: That's a really interesting way of doing things, because in a sense, then, that means that your role as a leader in the classroom is to facilitate self-leadership, and that that is what it's very much deeply rooted in.

AC: Yes, while giving them access to the knowledge that I've gained over the years.

DSV: Rita Gardiner, in the article that we're responding to for *The Word Hoard*, suggests that one of the problems with "authentic leadership" based on self-knowledge and, to a certain extent, on the leader's charisma, which we've talked about a little bit, is that people may not recognize a leader's style as leadership if that leader defies some social expectations. More specifically, Gardiner writes that "there are often tensions between a leader's beliefs and a community's willingness to agree with their position"

(64). What happens in the classroom, and what happens to the classroom dynamic, when students' social expectations about leadership or about the discourses of leadership that they're being introduced to, when those are defied?

JF: To go back to the word charisma, I think the idea of charisma itself is important. What I really meant more by that was the fact that one has to be aware of the fact that one moves into a room immediately as the center of attention, and therefore one has to take responsibility for the fact that one is doing that. And one brings a whole set of thoughts, of feelings, of beliefs, and one has to make those transparent to one's audience as quickly as possible. Having said that, as I understand Gardiner treating Arendt or thinking about Arendt, that can't be the only place where teaching happens. One has cultivated a certain self-knowledge, but one has to then be willing—and I find this difficult sometimes—to give up one's ego, to set that aside completely, and to allow the fact that it's going to, as I said earlier, be resisted, be attacked, be dissented against entirely. The great thing about that moment is that it is—and I hate this word or this phrase—what's called a "teachable moment." It is a place where you can then have a dialogue with the other person with a kind of respect for both sides, and traditionally that did not always happen and it is happening a lot more now.

AC: And I think, I mean, I'm more and more suspicious of the idea of charisma. I think I used to believe that it would be, or could be a means to an end in a classroom. But now, in a celebrity culture, in a world in which the students, more and more, will be passively consuming and identifying with modes of, for lack of a better word, idolatry, I think it's even more important to move away from that. I have

found that graduate students will make jokes about professors being “rock stars,” and for me, that is just such a dangerous dynamic to get into, because of the kind of potential for hostility, projection, and resentment it can set up if one doesn’t feel oneself to be a “rock star,” either now or in the future. I am getting older, so I’m less likely to be viewed idolatrously by my students, and I’m going to try and work towards an ethics of dignity, self-respect among the students, a less worshipful mode of teaching.

JF: Because, once again, you realize as you get older that it’s not about the immediate impact—it’s about the long-term strategy of how one parlays one’s thought against others, with others, and out in the world, and that’s a hard-won insight, as much as it is an insight, and parlaying that to students, I find, is really the bigger picture.

DSV: In terms of leadership skills that we acquire through the discourse that we work with in the arts and humanities, how do you think those translate when students move outside of the university setting, such as in the world of business, and what do they look like when they do translate?

JF: One of the things I am thinking about when I’m teaching the course on leadership in September is that whether one sees him as Satan or as a god of business, someone like Steve Jobs exemplifies, to a certain extent, the fact that business is hopefully becoming more ethically engaged with and ethically responsible for the world in which it situates itself.

To say that business is not going to happen and not going to transpire is an illusion in itself, so there has to be business. However, how it engages with the world and how people engage within a business setting is changing and changing radically, I think, and therefore the work that we do in the arts and humanities becomes that much more crucial. We can put [citizens trained in the arts and humanities] in situations where they are making profits and leading productive lives, and so forth and so on, but if we are also putting them in situations thinking about their responsibility for that work, I think we have done a great job, and the more we can take that on as part of our work, if I can risk sounding idealistic, maybe the world will get to be a better place.

AC: One thing that we encourage them not to do is think in clichés, and to the extent that they can take that out into the world as a mode of communication, being thoughtful and listening, and not relying on banalities to do the work of communication for them, I think that is always going to make them more connected in whatever venue they are working in. And to the extent that business language can be particularly instrumental or empty, the way that we have taught them to think about language differently—I hope they would just think about using language differently in the workplace, but also, I think, just the practices of listening, attending to detail.

University of Western Ontario