



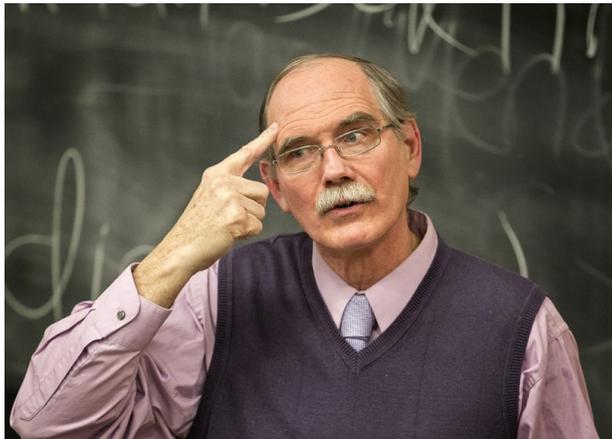
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Professor Norman Cornett (thelinknewspaper.ca)

## Norman Cornett's dialogic philosophy of education

February 7, 2017 || McGill/News || by Margherita de Castro

McGill University has yet to address grievances over the lack of transparency surrounding the dismissal of Religious Studies Professor Norman Cornett in 2007. Although McGill did not approve of Cornett's unorthodox pedagogic style, the professor continues to promote his dialogical philosophy of education as a guest instructor in universities in North America and Europe.

Inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin's "The Dialogic Imagination," Cornett sought to create a teaching style that encouraged creativity, believing it to be what distinguishes humans from other species.

"I don't teach [students] for a grade or for a diploma, I teach them for life," Cornett said. "Once you finish your education here, to what bookstore do you go to get

informed decisions? That is the key to becoming full board citizens of our world."

According to his website, Cornett adopted the traditional lecture format for a more personalized classroom experience. Cornett asked students to write

reflections based on the stimuli of a piece of art, sculpture, music, or text without revealing the name of the artist and telling the class not to worry about grammar. The professor would then invite the creator of the piece to join the class and respond to the student's reflections on the piece. Instead of being graded on exams, students were evaluated solely on participation.

"It gave you that kind of challenge which was really transformative," Emily Rose Antflick, a student of Cornett's between 2001 and 2004, said. "[... It] was one of the first times in my entire schooling history where I clearly have been asked without any curriculum expectations to just respond from my authentic self."

Cornett invited a string of distinguished guests to attend his lessons, including former prime minister Paul Martin, jazz pianist Oliver Jones, Academy Award winner Ethan Hawke, and celebrated Canadian Director Alanis Obomsawin. Obomsawin, who usually covers indigenous issues in her documentaries, decided to depict Cornett's plight in her 2009 documentary, "Professor Norman Cornett: Since when do we divorce the right answer from an honest answer?"

According to Rosanna Marmont, a student of Cornett's last course at McGill in 2007, the opportunity to interact with such influential individuals empowered students and gave them the confidence to follow their passion. Marmont said that Cornett's courses inspired her to become an artist, explaining that he gave her the confidence to become a sculptor.

"We think that we are not able to be journalists, we are not able to be artists, we are not able to be these things," Marmont said. "[Cornett] would empower his students. He would tell us that we could do these things, that our opinions were worthy of being heard. It encouraged us to pursue our path, our natural callings, and to have that courage."

The McGill administration terminated Cornett's contract without warning at the end of the Winter 2007 semester, after 15 years at the university. This sparked public outcry within the student community, as seen by the swarm of letters that were received by the *The McGill Tribune* at the time.

The university offered Cornett a severance package with a non-disclosure clause, which he rejected for ethical reasons.

being able to speak truth to power," Cornett said. "No amount of money could buy that."

The university has yet to issue a statement on the reason for Cornett's dismissal. Only current Sociology Professor and former Provost between 2005 and 2015

Anthony Masi addressed the issue by defending the university in a [letter](#) to *Le Devoir* in July 2007. Masi denied that potentially controversial in-class debates on Middle Eastern conflicts played any role in the decision and insisted that the McGill does respect freedom of speech.

The McGill administration's treatment towards Cornett demoralized many of his students. Marmont cited Cornett's dismissal as one of the reasons she transferred to Concordia University the following year.

Cornett has not allowed this experience to prevent him from pursuing his love for education. He has been invited by higher education institutions to conduct workshops for postgraduate students, such as the University of Leipzig and l' Université du Québec à Montréal. He has also translated a variety of French books into English. His most recent publication is a translation of Naim Kattan's *Farida*, a book portraying the often forgotten Jewish communities in Iraq.

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