

## Educational elders

DAVID LOADER ACKNOWLEDGES HIS ELDERS, THOSE WHO HAVE HELPED HIM TO FORMULATE HIS VIEWS ON EPISTEMOLOGY, LEARNING, SCHOOLING, CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY, AND ASKS WHO YOU WOULD NOMINATE AS YOUR ELDERS IN EDUCATION.

It's now customary for a conference to begin with a Welcome to Country or acknowledgement of the land's traditional custodians, its elders. In doing this we not only acknowledge the Indigenous people and their ties to country, but also remind ourselves that such elders and custodians have greatly contributed to, and continue to contribute to, our community.

It's a refreshing change in our culture. At long last there is some movement away from the Australian predilection to cut down our tall poppies. This shift to acknowledging our elders originates, not from a British heritage that still has a House of Lords, nor from our egalitarian dislike of bosses and preference for 'mateship,' but from our Indigenous community, the members of which retain an inherent deep respect for their elders.

There have always been individuals with authority, but those in authority don't always encourage respect, which is such an important aspect of what elders should inspire. We come close to the Indigenous use of the word 'elder' in religion, where there are people valued for their wisdom, who hold positions of responsibility rather than positional authority.

My challenge to you is to now extend this respect for elders into other parts of our lives. Let's pay our respects to our *educational* elders, those who have shared their wisdom with us and in so doing have given us insight, values and direction. If we are to act with clarity of vision and with an appreciation of our deeper values, we need to be able to identify what we value most in our inheritance and from whom we gained this insight.

To prompt you, let me publicly acknowledge those I consider to be my elders, both past and present, who have shaped me, helping me to formulate my views on epis-

temology, learning, schooling, curriculum and pedagogy.

Specifically, I acknowledge:

- Martin Buber, whose existential philosophy helped me to accept myself as a unique person, as well as accepting the personal uniqueness of my students. According to existentialism, truth can be discovered by entering into the intensity of personal experience. In contrast to how I experienced school, as an empty vessel to be filled with information, with the insight of Buber and others, I came to see knowledge as something built by the learner that is personal.
- John Dewey, whose approach to learning was to create a more active, self-directed form of learning for young people in schools. I saw this view as an invitation for me as a teacher to think beyond didactic instruction and even to think outside the classroom for learning experiences.
- John Holt who, along with Ivan Illich and others, confirmed my experience that 'schools can be bad places for kids.' The writing of Holt and his contemporaries challenged leaders and teachers in schools to rethink their practice of continuing to adopt an industrial model of schooling.
- Seymour Papert, who gave me both technology and epistemology, a revolution in thinking about students and knowledge. I immersed myself in his writing and found him a challenging and compelling personality.
- Liddy Nevile, the instigator of the 1980s Sunrise program, through which personal computing became a reality. Liddy was the mentor who introduced me to Papert's work and Logo software; she also encouraged me to tackle the impos-

sible when I encountered barriers to the implementation of the laptop program.

- Brian Caldwell, who helped me find my voice as a writer. Without his encouragement, I would not have contemplated writing something such as this.
- Mary Mason, a colleague with whom I worked in different school contexts and with whom I have defined and refined many of my educational ideas. She is someone who's not averse to robust discussion and often helped me to give some of my wilder ideas shape.

I could have included many others in this list, friends and colleagues who have acted as my role models and sounding boards. Narrowing the list down was a difficult and challenging task, and why individuals were chosen is purely reflective of their impact on me and my practice. This is a very personal list and is in no way meant to reflect 'right' authors or approaches.

Thinking about my own educational elders has given me a wonderful opportunity for reflection and for 'viewing from the ridge' my own philosophies and values. I strongly recommend completing such an exercise with a group of educational colleagues; it's well worth doing, both individually and collectively.

With World Teachers' Day this month, it's worth asking yourself who you'd nominate as *your* elders in education. **T**

*David Loader is an education consultant and Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne. His latest book is Jousting for the New Generation: Challenges to contemporary schooling, published by ACER Press. Email davidloader@bigpond.com*