



EDITORIAL

**Professor John D. Nisbet: Three memories  
and one regret**

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26203/k474-6b37>

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**To cite this article:** MCALEESE, R., (2016). Professor John D. Nisbet: Three memories and one regret. *Education in the North*, **23**(1).



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**Professor John D. Nisbet: Three memories and one regret.**

Memory 1: The Bad Lecture – The training of University teachers began in Aberdeen around 1965. The Professor of Education was asked by the Principal to do something to provide initial training for new staff – probationary lecturers. Over the next few years John developed what became known the University Teaching Methods Course. It lasted for about five days and was designed to get new staff “up and running”. Versions of this course ran for more than thirty-five years. It was used as a model by almost all other universities across the UK to promote staff development. To-day this pre-service training has morphed into the ubiquitous Learning Technology Centres. As part of the Course, without any warning to the participants, John gave a “bad” lecture during a session on “The Lecture – what the research says”. John was a master of the lecture format. This “bad lecture” came out of the blue. It was intended to make the probationers sit up and think – “... what is happening ? ... is he serious ?.. ... !”. I recall assisting John in many of his performances. Having joined the University in 1973 to investigate the use of television feedback in the training of university lecturers. As his assistant in the “Bad Lecture” I was to look incredulous at the hesitant parody of a lecture and his incoherent explanations. Research was not influencing performance. However on every occasion the penny eventually dropped!!

Memory 2: Think Before You Respond – John was a shrewd judge of when to act and when to reflect. Once, after a failure to get a grant for “exciting... innovative.. ground breaking...!” work using video feedback in training university teachers, I showed John my response to the rejection. He took time to read it, then said “... OK .. I have read your interesting letter telling the referees they didn’t understand what you wanted to do... You make good points.. however .. don’t send it immediately ... wait until to-morrow... if it is still what you want to say... send it..”. I didn’t send it. Lesson learned!.

Memory 3: “ ... there is no future for computers in Education...” - After I returned to Aberdeen in 2002 John and I often talked or reflected over lunch – first in the old Canteen of the College of Education, then over coffee in the MacRobert Building. One day he brought in a “prize”. He had found a letter dated 19 May 1959 and his handwritten notes from 29 July 1996. The 1959 letter asked departments about any future use for “digital computing machines” in their research and teaching. John had been asked to reply for Education. There were five very similar questions – e.g. “.. is

obtaining a digital computer of interest to you ... ?” To each question John answered NO!. Some years before he showed me the original letter and his notes made at the time (both of which I still have) – he had been reflecting on the effect of research on practice – especially the multitude of learning technology studies on the quality of university teaching He had written on the original letter, in his small neat rounded handwriting : ...“ ... if I ever feel self-satisfied I read .... my answers to the questions in the 1959 letter all saying “NO!” or “..of little use..!”. John was always one to move on. He was never completely satisfied by his many achievements. He was never “grand” about his expertise. I think he believed that good research did not necessarily lead to good practice.

A regret: tempus fugit - A few years ago John asked me to join him in writing a history of the way those early “digital computing machines” i.e. computers, the Internet etc., had revolutionized learning and the student experience at Aberdeen. By then he was a fully paid up member of the interactive learning community - perhaps honorary member? We were still discussing this project when John’s final illness took hold. I only wish we had been given more time to reflect on the way the educational world had changed and how he welcomed the new opportunities brought about many changes. It is a long time since I first saw his “bad lecture”. If we think that the experience for learners across education has improved over fifty years then John Nisbet’s memory must be celebrated. The quality of thinking across educational research and educational practice is so much better because of JN – as he signed so many neatly handwritten pieces of sound and helpful advice to those who still miss him.

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June 2016