

MALCOLM MACPHERSON: “I CANNOT TEACH ANYBODY ANYTHING; I CAN ONLY MAKE THEM THINK”

Glenys Ker and Martin Andrew

In 2021, the retirement of Dr Malcolm Macpherson from Capable NZ's Central Otago branch and from the Scope journal whānau left a considerable hole in the expertise of both entities. Seen as a pioneer in business excellence qualifications, Malcolm left quite a mark on his areas of endeavour and continues to be an inspiration to his colleagues.

Recalling twelve or more years ago, Phil Ker relates, “those early days at the forefront of this work was inspirational.” This article recognises some of the contributions that Malcolm has made, and brings together some reminiscences and recollections of close colleagues in order to paint a picture of the colleague whose retirement brings to a close a much feted engagement.

The quote from Socrates in the title was submitted by a colleague as a fitting whakataukū for Malcolm. When the authors asked those in Malcolm's communities of interest for words to summarise Malcolm, the concept of the philosopher was dominant. Margy-Jean Malcolm pays tribute, to Malcolm directly as one who “valued the depth and breadth of your experience – and the wisdom shared from that.”

In addition to his collected wisdom and ability to philosophise on any topic, Malcolm is also viewed as one with breadth of vision. As Glenys and Phil Ker put it, “Malcolm always saw the big picture – an excellent strategic mind and an effective advocate for Central Otago.” Malcolm's advocacy for the local saw him engaged closely in areas of regional governance, an area where Alexa Forbes comments of his advanced and foresightful thinking.

Alexa was also fortunate enough to have been mentored by Malcolm on her Masters of Professional Practice (MPP) journey. Alexa comments on his eye-opening mentoring: “your insights on thinking about the future and the likely disruptions to planned and expected paths were invaluable to me as you mentored me through my MPP.” Another Capable NZ staff member who was also Malcolm's learner, Michael Simmons, concurs: “I learned a lot from you during my MPP and our time working together with Real Journeys and Corrections. I always enjoyed working with you. Thank you for your support and wise counsel.”

Wise counsel may be one theme in the story of Malcolm Macpherson, but just as notable is his generosity. One colleague writes, “He was a generous colleague and particularly generous with his learners.” Listing a long list of Malcolm's impacts, including his passion and editorial prowess, Glenys Forsyth concludes, “Thank you for being so generous in sharing your time, knowledge, and expertise for Capable NZ's cause.” Jo Kirkwood also shares an anecdote on the theme of generosity:

Malcolm was hugely generous with his time and expertise with learners and new staff. When I first started I had a few learners with Malcolm, and I often called on him for advice – and his significant experience with Capable NZ made me feel very supported in my work. His range of professional experience is significant, and our learners have benefitted from this wealth of knowledge, as well as Malcolm's patience and complete respect of our learners.

Malcolm's impact on both colleagues and learners has been long-lasting and impactful. Cushla Donnelly, reflecting on her own engagement with learners, recalls having learned much in conversation with Malcolm, enabling her to continue to grow. Steve Henry recalls, with fondness, "his ability to capture with razor sharp precision the issue at hand is my abiding memory of working with him." There is special mention of "his positive contribution to the culture of enquiry", something common in the words of all who passed their tributes and thanks to Malcolm. As another colleague summarises, "His ability to work with a range of learners in other disciplines also demonstrated his wide-ranging skill and knowledge, and always his passion for learning." In addition to his wisdom and passion, Malcolm was noted for the versatility of his contribution to Capable NZ's culture.


A lifelong learner, Malcolm even undertook an MPP of his own in 2016 in order to walk in learners' shoes. His assessment presentation contains a poetic meditation that sums up Malcolm well in his own words:

I'm a constructivist by nature
I make sense of my world by writing about it
I scribble during phone conversations, make bulleted lists ...
... capture design ideas for my workshop on the backs of envelopes and table napkins
Journal, in an informal, free-range way
Moleskine notebooks on my desk date back a decade
I write. A lot.

A man of mixed methods, Malcolm resolutely refused to be a story. The words of James Harrison serve as a fitting retirement wish from the Capable NZ team: "I have always valued your considered and gentle advice and hope you will still have energy to contribute to those matters near and dear to you. My very best wishes for as long a retirement as possible." Ngā mihi mahana ki a koe.

Glenys Ker works as a facilitator of learning, an academic mentor, and assessor at Capable NZ in Otago Polytechnic's College of Work-based Learning. A lifetime career practitioner, she examined adult learning and independent learning pathways and professional practice qualifications in her doctoral journey. Her passion for supporting learners to articulate their skills, knowledge and attitudes gained from their work-based learning experiences is matched by her love of helping elite athletes think about "life during and after sport."

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Martin Andrew operates as a creative mentor in postgraduate programmes, including Master and Doctorate degrees in Professional Practice. Prior to his four to five years supporting the College of Work-based Learning in Otago, New Zealand, he had sojourned away from his hometown of Ōtepoti/Dunedin with two honorary posts at Melbourne universities in Creative Industries and Trans-national Education (TNE). His work and research have become increasingly focussed on doctorate education and supporting learners to reach their own personal best through critically reflective practice and writing. A transdisciplinary, he emphasises that his past disciplines have included Education, Drama, Linguistics and Writing, Creative and otherwise. He holds honorary positions in Australia, Vietnam and Indonesia.

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