

ILTA Distinguished Achievement Award 2020 winner

Cathie Elder on team efforts, highlights of her career, subconscious mentoring and medicine bottles. *Interview by Annemiek Huisman*



Late last year, on December 13th, it was announced that Cathie Elder, founding member and past Co-President of ALTAANZ (2013- 2014), had won the prestigious ILTA Distinguished Achievement Award 2020. The following excerpts from the citation illustrate Cathie's work and persona:

Cathie's work in the area of the assessment of language for specific purposes has demonstrated great depth and breadth (...) Another area of language testing which she pioneered is the area of post- entry language assessment (PELA), where she was one of the early contributors to this area (...) Cathie has provided outstanding

leadership (...) She has served in all the leading roles in our profession (...) In Australia and New Zealand(...), she has played a leading role nationally in setting policy direction in language assessment in schools, in universities and in employment (...) Cathie has played a very active and committed role in mentoring students and early career researchers (...) In summary, Cathie Elder's contributions to the field have been extensive and varied and have made a major impact on the wider field of language testing.

Soon after the announcement, public congratulatory comments from prominent scholars in the field flooded in:

"Congratulations for a well-deserved award which marks your enormous contribution to the field and inspiring leadership!"

"A richly deserved award. Thank you so much for everything you've done for ILTA, language testing and your colleagues. Great choice."

"A hearty congratulations Cathie! Your openness, transparency, diligence and ability to listen have contributed to much progress in our field."

"There could not have been a better choice, no more excellent and distinguished scholar, practitioner, mentor and wonderful person!!!"

I've been lucky to have gotten to know the truly wonderful person that's Cathie through my job at the Language Testing Research Centre at The University of Melbourne. She'd retired as the Centre's Director a couple of years before I started in 2014, but it would soon become clear to me that she was still very much involved with the Centre and indeed the field, working on various projects and providing support and advice. Time to take this opportunity to put Cathie back in the ALTAANZ spotlight! The following interview was conducted in Cathie's office in the Babel Building at The University of Melbourne, pre-COVID-19...

Congratulations again Cathie!

Thank you, but I should say, and you should include this, that I've done everything as part of a team. I was really pleased and touched to get the award, and thankful to my colleagues for nominating me, but I'm not one of these solo stars, so I feel like I'm accepting the award on behalf of heaps of people. Make sure to put that in!

What did you think when you found out you had won the Award?

(Laughingly) Well, I knew I was being nominated, and I agreed to that while thinking I had Buckley's chance of getting this award! So when I found out that I had won, like I said, I was both touched and honoured but I also felt rather undeserving.

But what about that long list of achievements! Oh look, I'm pleased! I've been very lucky, I've had a wonderful career but I'm an eclectic person. I've published on lots of topics, so I guess my surprise was that I could win the award with such a diverse range of inputs and experiences rather than having had a singular intellectual impact. It just shows that the award is about recognition of different kinds of contributions, so I'm very happy to receive it but still a bit flabbergasted really.

What comments did you enjoy reading most in the Award Committee's citation?

I liked the list of projects and service roles that I've been involved in, the nominees have worked hard to pick through the various things I've done. Because I've retired from university and am in the process of putting my career behind me, it's gratifying to be reminded that it was worthwhile. Plus, it's just particularly touching to know that other people thought I was worth nominating, that's a really nice thing. (Laughingly) But then of course: 'Oh my gosh, now I've got to give a talk!' (the award winner is invited to deliver a plenary lecture at the Language Testing Research Colloquium at which the award is presented). You know how I love talks..

Where do you think that comes from? You must have done hundreds of talks in your career!

Well, I was never a very relaxed public speaker. I think in this case it has something to do with expectations, that because you've won a momentous award you need to give a momentous talk and then you think to yourself, 'What can I do that is worthy of the recognition that I've been given?' Anyway, that's just self-indulgence!

In terms of your career, what do you yourself consider highlights?

Well, I guess the first one was actually before I went into language testing, when I came back from Europe and waltzed into a job in Italian Language Studies at La Trobe University. It was a new department and it was a very exciting challenge to work out how to teach Italian effectively and meet the needs of the very diverse population of students which included both heritage and non-heritage learners. It was that feeling of building something new, and I had the same feeling again when I came to work at the Language Testing Research Centre in 1990. I was finishing my Masters in Applied Linguistics at the University of Melbourne and the Centre had just been created. It was part of a national network of Centres, we were a very small team and there was quite a bit of government money at the time, so we thought up interesting projects and felt we were building a body of knowledge and experience in Australia that was new and important. I worked at the Centre for 10 years on short-term contracts, and then left for a 'real' job, a continuing academic position at the University of Auckland. In Auckland, part of my role was to set up a new testing regime for all incoming university students, the post-entry Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELNA) to identify students in need of language support, so I was again being part of something new, useful and exciting. The beautiful thing about DELNA was that the whole university was behind it, so I got lots of support from on high and felt part of something that mattered to the university. It was also illuminating to realise how much good policy matters for testing; having a nice instrument is irrelevant if it's not properly embedded in the larger teaching and learning environment.

Are there any particular projects then that you've been involved in that really stand out to you?

It sounds a bit corny, but I always liked projects where you felt you could do some good. In our field, these are usually projects that are linked to a very specific local context, often at the interface between testing and teaching. They're projects where you can see the immediate value, where the test information will be useful and beneficial. I'm thinking of the range of proficiency tests we developed for teachers, which were designed to model good teaching practice and to generate relevant feedback for teacher preparation programs. Then there has been the OET [*Occupational English Test*] related research, oriented to bringing the test, and the test cut-scores, more closely in line with stakeholder needs. But really, all projects have been interesting because it's all about problem-solving, and I like problem-solving. I think testing is where the rubber hits the road, where you have an idea and you have to find the practical means of implementing it. There are lots of constraints, so you have to work out the most efficient and meaningful way of working within those constraints. There's nothing formulaic about problem solving - it's a creative process which over time builds insights that can be shared and drawn on in future work.

The Award Committee really made a point of highlighting your role in mentoring.

Yes, and that's interesting because if I've done it, I've done it subconsciously. My own experience of being mentored in the Centre with Alan (Davies) and Tim (McNamara) was that we were left very much to our own devices to come up with solutions. Alan didn't believe in giving advice, so he trusted people to use their intelligence. He would talk and interact with people and ask questions, but he didn't actually direct you to do certain things. And Tim (like Alan) is a true intellectual whose role has been to get people together and thrash out ideas. So, I suppose if I've been a mentor, I've probably done it in the same way: just getting people together, listening to their ideas and working with them.

Isn't that interesting though, because not only the Award Committee but also lots of people in the field commented on your role as a mentor in their congratulatory messages.

Well, perhaps they felt that they were given trust or that I had confidence in them, and that's all you need, space to do what you need to do. I'm not conscious of having schooled people in doing it the 'right' way at all.

In your view then, what should mentoring involve? And should academics, particularly early career academics, be actively looking for mentors?

Well, being around creative and successful people is definitely very important, and for early career academics it is probably good to find someone and initiate contact. What's helpful I think as well in academia is to know what's worth spending your time on, to get the balance right in a way that's going to further your career. I think it's good to have a hard-headed person from outside to advise you about how to do that. So, in my view, mentoring is giving people confidence in themselves by having confidence in them, but also helping them prioritise.

[At this point in the interview Cathie engages me in a chat about my and her own experiences as an early career academic, and I realise I'm in the middle of one of Cathie's subconscious

mentoring moments. We move on...]

Then a bit of a cliché question perhaps, but how has the field of language testing changed in your view?

When I started working here at Melbourne in 1990 we were learning all the tools of the trade: what is language proficiency and how should it be tested, how do we design tests, how to do the statistical analyses. (Laughingly) We were very pleased with what we learned, thought we were pretty fabulous and that we were becoming experts in this specialised field. Back then, the focus was very much on the 'what' and 'how', and I think the focus of our work and in the language testing field more generally has now shifted to the contexts of testing, *why* we're testing and what we're doing to people when we're testing them. The field has broadened out to encompass issues of impact, consequences, fairness and justice. We've become aware that a test is this tiny little cog in a much larger wheel, and that our responsibilities extend far beyond just designing good instruments. It's more about accepting responsibility, or at least better understanding how test information gets taken up in different contexts by different stakeholders. I think this has made the field more challenging in a way because we feel more powerless than we did back then when we were just focussing on creating good little

engines. We now spend more of our time listening to and learning from stakeholders, and also explaining to policy makers what they can and can't do with language tests, what the limitations and constraints are. I think Bernard Spolsky once said that tests should come with labels, like medicine bottles, listing all the counter indications. I think as a field we're now more aware of the side effects of testing and the need to monitor them. I'm not sure that we're very good at it, but we are more conscious of the need to locate our expertise within a wider forum.

To finish off, now you've retired, what hobbies have you taken up?

The thing I've done seriously since I've retired is yoga. I've done a teacher training course so that's a whole new set of skills, mind training of a very different kind, and I deliberately chose it to take me to a new realm. Apart from that, I'm currently learning Greek, I garden, read, socialise, travel. I've done a bit of hiking, I've sung in choirs, I go to music festivals. There's plenty to do other than come to work! Work still occupies my life considerably but not oppressively, that's the important thing.

Talking to Cathie is always such a pleasure, the way she articulates ideas, listens carefully and considers your input is really encouraging and motivating. She's generous with her time and attention and is very engaging, no matter what she talks about. I think it's time to take up yoga and learn Greek!