Robert Fischer’s Impact on the Language Teaching and Learning Field

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Meeting Dr. Robert Fischer

Bob Fischer’s pleasant demeanor, honest smile, and magnetic charm immediately put you at ease when you first meet him. Bob is a multifaceted individual. Behind the kind man, who makes you feel comfortable discussing French literature, teaching methodology, and technology, is a gifted professor, amazing researcher, superb leader, and steadfast friend. I first met Bob at the 1997 CALICO conference held at West Point, New York, when he took charge of the organization, giving it needed stability and direction. He made sure that CALICO would remain on the cutting edge, continuing the trajectory of the founder Minnie Kenny of the National Security Agency and Dr. Frank Otto, first Executive Director. He grew the organization through his perseverance and creativity, attracting a membership of diverse researchers and developers.

I know Bob, the human being and the professional. I am one of the lucky ones who had the privilege and pleasure to work with him on the CALICO Board from 2000 to 2002 and to stay in touch throughout our professional careers. We have one goal in common: to improve the language proficiency levels of students, and we both care about supporting those who strive to make that goal a reality. We also agree that to achieve our goal it takes an interdisciplinary team of expertise and resources (Fischer, 1999), and that although technology by itself is not the answer; without it, we would not be able to serve the needs of learners and language professionals as effectively.

Dr. Fischer & Technology

Bob’s work preceded and prepared the path for what we currently call “Blended Learning,” a mix of classroom, virtual, online, and computer-human interactions to address all proficiency skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. In the 1980s, we had limited technology for foreign language computer assisted language learning (CALL). Even in the 1990s, we were still grappling with accessories in the emerging computer hardware and software arena. In fact, until the year 2000, we had very scarce resources for handling the variety of foreign language fonts, multimedia objects, and human machine interactivity (Fischer, 1999). While the computing power and growth we have experienced in the past 15 years are amazing, I believe that Bob would acknowledge that although the computers
are faster and capable of storing higher volumes of multimedia files, the science of language and skills acquisition through CALL needs to grow further.

**FISCHER’S VISION AND ACTIONS**

Bob has a far-reaching understanding of the language learning process and how to maximize the use of the technology in that process. To illustrate the unique contributions that he made during his CALICO tenure as Executive Director, I will highlight a few of the actions that he took, his impact on the profession, and my recollection of key interactions in the past decade and a half (1997 to 2012).

1. Bob continued and extended the path taken by the first CALICO visionaries, and like his predecessors (Borchardt, 1997) he raised the importance of CALL research and its academic standing. He worked hard through the traditional academic settings to gain the support of the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages in establishing policy that legitimizes both teaching and research within a foreign language department, while ensuring that faculty members who engaged in technological activities were rewarded for their work in the CALL field. In 2001, he brought the CALICO membership to ratify the joint Policy Statements of CALICO, EUROCALL, and IALLT to establish the role of information and communication technologies in language learning and teaching. The Policy Statements defined CALL as inherently a multidisciplinary scholarly endeavor that includes both theoretical and empirical work, thus making CALL a scientific field that would gain respect in academia and would be rewarded similar to other scientific research and publications. Through this and other efforts, Bob sought to define the field and have it acknowledged as “Another Dimension in Professional Advancement” (Fischer, 1999).

2. To enable the pursuit of CALL developers and give them the academic acknowledgement of a peer reviewed publication, Bob took on for all of the past years the role of Editor in Chief of the CALICO Journal. He pushed for meaningful and well-documented studies that enabled the language community to better understand the impact of technology and CALL on the learner, attracting a variety of contributors from within language departments and outside.

3. Another of his key contributions is the Courseware Showcase at every CALICO conference. The showcase promotes casual demonstrations and exchanges of software in development, prototypes, and individual explorations. Bob would often tell me that the “showcase” was one of his favorite components of the yearly conference. I found it to be a great venue to get feedback on efforts that were in development and engage with others freely in a collegial atmosphere.

4. A great promoter of innovation, Bob has facilitated many good ideas. When I started working with speech recognition, Bob saw lots of potential and encouraged me to pursue research and development in the area (Egan,
1999). We teamed up with EUROCALL and created the Integrating Speech In Language Learning (InSTILL) special interest group (Ehsani & Knodt, 1998).

5. **As a Courseware Designer**, Bob is known to many of us as the creator of the Libra Authoring System, which “was designed to enable faculty to create multimedia materials that focus on facilitating student’s acquisition of listening comprehension proficiency in foreign languages” (Fischer & Farris, 1999, p. 59). The other design principles were ease of use and activities guided by strong instructional design and implementation of pedagogical standards. He is still searching for ways to unleash the power of computational linguistics into the CALL products. In 2011, at a workshop with several representatives from the National Security Education Program Flagships, he noted that we need to support the cognitive and pragmatic communicative skills essential in language learning. Technology is a powerful enabler in the hands of insightful designers and instructors.

I hope that the next generation of leaders in the language profession will follow in the footsteps of Dr. Fischer and will continue his vision and be given the needed resources for the research and development of improved methods, scientific understanding and development of tools that improve language learning. Finally I would say that language is at the heart of our lives to create better communities and a more peaceful world. As historians would attest, “words” have started wars and “words” have created peace. “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head; if you talk to a man in his own language, that goes to his heart.”-- *Nelson Mandela*

I am honored and thankful to have been given the opportunity to pay tribute to a great leader, colleague, and friend.

**REFERENCES**


