

## A particular gift: what Ted Sizer did for me

Thomas A. Wilson

Ted Sizer died of cancer on October 21, 2009.

I worked closely with Ted from 1986 to 1992, when he was establishing the Coalition of Essential Schools at Brown University. He changed the course of my professional life.

The most important idea I learned from him was the value of the particular. He began his ideas about good education and change by grasping the details of actual life: what it means to a child, a teacher and a school. This is a key part of the definition of “practice” that is embedded in Practice-Based Inquiry®.

Eileen Landry and Jonathan Goodman caught a description of Ted’s gift to me in their essay *Remembering Ted Sizer*, which was published by the *Providence Journal* on December 7, 2009. Here are some key paragraphs:

Ted’s observation style was quite different. On a typical school visit, he asked to shadow a student—an average student, not a class president or soon-to-be valedictorian. After brief greetings all around, Ted and his young guide headed off to class. Together, they attended all the student’s classes, ate a cafeteria lunch and got to know one another. Throughout the school day, Ted sat near the student, listening and observing carefully, doing his best to experience school as the student did. On other school visits, he shadowed a teacher, attended all classes and meetings, discussed the teacher’s work and life in and out of school, observed carefully, asked questions, and did his best to understand the world from a teacher’s view.

Sizer sought to “understand teachers’ and students’ understanding.” Through extended observations, he watched what teachers asked students to do. He observed what students actually did and how they explained to themselves and others what they were being asked to do. He studied how students constructed meaning and acquired knowledge both on their own and with peers. He looked for the quality of conversation in the classroom, wondering to what extent there was a community of civil, intellectual inquiry around topics—real world topics—that extended beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries.

The task of preparing excellent teachers and providing support throughout their career is complex and requires substantial resources. Sizer believed that beginning teachers are best prepared through extended work in clinical settings under the careful supervision of well-qualified mentor teachers. He believed that practicing teachers needed extended time for the kind of learning and reflection that supports their own continued development as academics and practitioners. To be excellent, education must be a highly reflective practice, and the characteristics of reflection, respect and support must explicitly be built into the curriculum of teacher preparation and into the attitudes and actions of those who work with practicing teachers.

He challenged his colleagues and students to question moves toward uniformity and standardization, and to reject Horace's compromises. Instead, he taught us that teaching is creative and intellectually serious work, a historically celebrated calling that—like all great crafts—should deeply enrich both its recipients and those who practice it.

Sizer's work has influenced so many that his voice remains a force—some would say a counter-balance—in current educational debates. How can large schools and large school systems meet the public demand for accountability and efficient, objective measures while at the same time recognizing that the substance of teaching and learning is the almost magical multi-layered interplay between student and teacher? How can we address teacher quality in a nuanced way so that we bring in new teachers with the most effective balance of academic skills, interpersonal skills, knowledge of methods and passion for learning? How can we support and give freedom—but not free reign—to current students, teachers and administrators who are working hard every day to make schools a place for civil, intellectual inquiry?

Ted, thank you.

Go to [Tom' Blog](#) if you would like to comment.

Eileen Landay was Brown's clinical professor of English education from 1993 to 2006. In 1998, she co-founded the ArtsLiteracy Project. She currently teaches at Brown and at Johnson & Wales University. Jonathan Goodman is a graduate of Brown's Master of Arts in Teaching program. He has worked in that program as a mentor teacher since 1996. In addition, he has taught at Hope High School for 20 years; he currently serves as Hope's English Teacher Leader.