

# Standing on the shoulders of giants

Spring this year saw the loss of two truly great educationalists – Professors Bob Burden and Reuven Feuerstein. Here **Dr Judy Silver**, colleague and friend to Bob Burden, pays tribute to the professor, recalling the many contributions he made to the thinking skills movement and the lives of children in classrooms across the country.



Professor Bob Burden addressing the International Thinking Skills Conference, June 2013. (Image: [thinkingschoolsinternational.com](http://thinkingschoolsinternational.com))

It is said in any field of learning that all students learn from those who came before, so in this sense, we all stand on the shoulders of the giants from previous generations.

In the spring of this year, we lost two giants and major architects of the thinking skills movement – Professor Bob Burden of the University of Exeter and Professor Reuven Feuerstein of Jerusalem, Israel. It is extraordinary that these two giants died within three weeks of each other – despite the difference in their ages and backgrounds, Bob Burden and Reuven Feuerstein shared a great affection for one another, and they had huge respect for one another’s work and educational philosophy. Those of us privileged to have worked with them both well know the impact of their passing.

### A shared passion

Professor Reuven Feuerstein’s work touched and continues to touch the lives of countless children, their families and educators all over the world. Born in Romania, he went first to France in the 1930s before later emigrating to Israel. A student of Piaget, Feuerstein’s long and fascinating career led him to become one of the modern grandfathers and architects of cognitive education. It was his unwavering belief in the cognitive modifiability of the human condition which was to underpin his groundbreaking theories of mediated learning and the conditions for the modifying environment.

Professor Emeritus Robert Laurence Burden was 74 when he died peacefully at home in Exeter on 22 March this year after a long battle with cancer. Professor Reuven Feuerstein died peacefully at home in Jerusalem only three weeks later at the age of 92. These two friends, separated by a generation and cultural backgrounds, shared a passion for using cognitive education and mediated learning as the prime tools to changing children’s lives.

When Bob discovered Feuerstein’s groundbreaking book, *Dynamic Assessment*, after its publication in 1979, he was fascinated by Feuerstein’s fresh dynamic approach to cognitive assessment, his groundbreaking theory of cognitive modifiability and his unique methods for helping children learn how to learn. With a team of psychology students from the University of Exeter, Bob made the long journey to Jerusalem to meet Feuerstein himself.



Professor Reuven Feuerstein (Image: arrcaonius.org)

In the early eighties, Bob was the first person to invite Feuerstein and his team to the UK to speak to psychologists, teachers and parents. The two men were to become lifelong friends and collaborators, and Feuerstein's work was to have a profound influence on Bob's own ideas.

### Early life and career

Bob Burden was born in Kilburn, London, in 1940 during World War Two. He was the eldest of three children and his father was a bus driver. Like many other small children at the time, Bob was evacuated to the countryside out of danger of the bombs, but his mother missed him so much she brought him home again and Bob spent the duration of the blitz in Kilburn. He vividly remembered sitting under the kitchen table with his mother during the bombings.

Later, he attended Kilburn Grammar School where his teachers took a particular interest in this bright boy from 'the flats' and encouraged him to apply to university. Bob was to remain grateful and mindful of the impact that his teachers' mentoring was to have on his career, first at school and later at university.

After teaching for a short period of time, Bob decided he wanted to take further training and qualified as an educational psychologist with a particular interest in applied psychology. His doctorate was concerned with exploring the feelings and attitudes of mothers of children with learning difficulties and the impact of these on their child's development. This early study may have fuelled his lifelong academic interest in attitudes and their effect on children's motivation for learning. Shortly after, he decided he wanted to pursue an academic career and joined the faculty of the School of Educational Psychology at the University of Exeter.

### At the University of Exeter

In 1999, Bob became head of the School of Education at the University of Exeter, a post he held until 2002. It was during this period that I first met him. At the time, I had left classroom practice and was doing my own training in Feuerstein's methods of dynamic assessment. Bob was always the most passionate supporter and advocate of Feuerstein's theories and their application, so when I was first thinking about my own doctorate, it was natural for me to contact Bob. Although he was extremely busy, he agreed to supervise my research. His advice, support, wisdom and humour made that experience a profound joy. From the beginning of

our relationship, I was impressed by his ability to bridge the gulf between complex theories and teaching practice. We became and remained close friends until the end of his life.

When he became Professor Emeritus in 2005, Bob established the Cognitive Education Development Unit (CEDU), formerly the Cognitive Education Centre, in the Graduate School of Education. The CEDU was set up to promote the idea of candidate schools applying to become what Bob termed 'thinking schools'.

Using the sound theoretical principles of Feuerstein's Structural Cognitive Modifiability and his ideas for creating a modifying environment, the prime focus of a thinking school is centred around the idea that a whole-school approach is essential, and that whatever methods and thinking tools candidate schools might choose to employ are firmly embedded within the culture and shared language of the whole learning environment.

In the intervening years between 2005 and the present day, hundreds of candidate schools have applied to the CEDU for evaluation to become a thinking school. The work of CEDU has had and continues to have a profound impact on the quality of teaching practice in hundreds of schools up and down the UK, and further afield in Europe and beyond. Bob's team of evaluators



and colleagues at CEDU are delighted that his work will continue under the new directorship of Professor Rupert Wegerif.

### Other work

Professor Bob Burden was a prolific writer. He wrote many books and articles, including a number of articles for *Creative Teaching and Learning* (see box), and held a position on the editorial boards of several academic journals. He authored many well known publications including the *Myself as a Learner Scale (MALS)*, first published in 2000 and now in its third edition, *Thinking through the Curriculum* (1998), and *Dyslexia and Self Concept* (2004).

His research covered a wide range of issues including learning environments, thinking skills, children's motivation to learn and their self-image as learners. He always held a particular interest in dyslexia and was a major contributor to the work of the British Dyslexia Association. In 2009, his work with dyslexic children was recognised and cited in the Rose Report which led to a welcome change in government policy.

Bob was an exceptional academic respected all over the world, a much loved and esteemed colleague, a loyal friend and ultimately, a devoted family man. He will be sadly missed.

**Dr Judy Silver is Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Exeter.**

## From our archives

If you are interested in reading more about Bob's work and how it can be applied to your classroom, have a read of the many articles about and by this noteworthy professor from the TeachingTimes archives. The articles listed below are just a sample – you'll find many more on cognitive development, self-image and becoming a thinking school at [www.teachingtimes.com](http://www.teachingtimes.com).

### Articles on self-concept:

- Am I a good learner? – Bob Burden explores the learner's self-image as an important aspect of thinking skills evaluation.  
**[library.teachingtimes.com/articles/tt01-good-learner](http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/tt01-good-learner)**
- Myself as a learner – Bob Burden on the key to student success: self-concept and motivation. (Available with subscription to School Leadership Today)  
**[library.teachingtimes.com/articles/slt\\_myself\\_as\\_a\\_learner](http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/slt_myself_as_a_learner)**
- Circle of friends – Bob Burden and Gill Taylor on the cognitive and emotional effects of a 'circle of friends' on children with behavioural difficulties.  
**[library.teachingtimes.com/articles/circle-friends-ttc4](http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/circle-friends-ttc4)**

### Articles on thinking skills and schools:

- What is a thinking school? – Bob Burden gives practical advice on becoming a thinking school.  
**[library.teachingtimes.com/articles/cognitive-curriculum-thinking-skills](http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/cognitive-curriculum-thinking-skills)**
- Strategies for thinking – The assistant headteacher of a thinking school in Durham on encouraging reluctant thinkers.  
**[library.teachingtimes.com/articles/strategiesforthinking](http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/strategiesforthinking)**
- Cognitive tools across the curriculum – Teachers at one thinking school in Exeter on the enthusing effects making thinking skills a priority had on staff and students.  
**[library.teachingtimes.com/articles/cognitive-tools-across-the-curriculum](http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/cognitive-tools-across-the-curriculum)**
- Thinking maps in action – Bob Burden and Judy Silver visit a primary school in Hampshire that has taken on Thinking Maps in a big way.  
**[library.teachingtimes.com/articles/thinking-maps-in-action](http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/thinking-maps-in-action)**