
The sound of MUSEC

**Kevin
Wheldall**

**Robyn
Wheldall**



In 2025, we will be celebrating 30 years of MultiLit. The ‘Making Up Lost Time In Literacy’ Initiative, or MULTILIT for short, was established in 1995 by Kevin Wheldall who was then Professor of Education at Macquarie University and the Director of its Special Education Centre (MUSEC). MUSEC was MultiLit’s academic home. When Kevin arrived in Australia as its second Director in 1990, there was already a strong tradition of behaviourally oriented research into the teaching of academic skills. Coupled with Kevin’s own work in this area in the UK, MUSEC continued to be a centre at the forefront of effective instruction. What began as a research and development initiative has grown and endured beyond our expectations in the mid-1990s. As we look towards our anniversary year, it is a good time to reflect on from where we have come and to honour those who came before us in the tradition of the science of learning and evidence-based instruction.

Macquarie University Special Education Centre (MUSEC) was founded in 1975, with (the late) Professor Jim Ward as its first Director. Jim was a leading figure in British educational psychology prior to his appointment to Macquarie and was the first to publish articles on an operant, applied behaviour analysis (ABA) approach to classroom behaviour management in the UK. In a history of Macquarie University, Jim Ward was described as “one of the more original and creative spirits from Macquarie’s first twenty-five years. Voluble and articulate in a blunt north country way (he was a Yorkshire-man), emotional but intellectually demanding, he relished academic life of the enterprising and vigorous kind.” (Robyn can attest to this. She was privileged to have her first office at Macquarie located next to Jim’s.) When it was time for Jim to retire, they looked around for a like-minded educational psychologist who could carry on the early work of the Special Education Centre at Macquarie University and Kevin was appointed, coming from a role as the Director of the Centre for Child Study at the University of Birmingham.

In this editorial, we would like to pay tribute to the early work of the evidence-based special educators of what was to become MUSEC. We would like to see public recognition of the early work of Alex Maggs, Greg Hotchkis, Bernie Thorley, Sue Bracey, Margaret Goninan, Moira Pieterse and other pioneers. When the Special Education Centre was established as part of an initiative of the Australian Universities Commission, the focus was on practical solutions and helping to remove the divide between special and regular education. The Centre developed a rigorous postgraduate degree program to develop special education leaders who could inform classroom practice and support regular teachers who were educating a range of students. A special school was also established as part of the Centre so that research and teaching could take place to advance the purpose of the Centre and to produce practical solutions.

In our view, Dr Alex Maggs deserves a special mention. Maggs was appointed as the Centre’s Assistant Director in late 1975 and had a particular interest in precision teaching (data-based instruction) and direct instruction. In 1982, he published an article with Megan Lockery in *Educational Psychology* titled ‘Direct Instruction Research in Australia: a ten-year analysis’. (There is a nice connection here, as Kevin was a founding editor of *Educational Psychology* from the University of Birmingham at that time.) The article drew attention to the fact that research in the US into Direct Instruction programs had been carried out since the 1970s, showing that they were the most effective in teaching academic skills to a range of populations in different settings. Maggs had been leading his own research program in Australia in Direct Instruction since the early 1970s. He did much to advance the knowledge of the remarkable (but ignored) results of Project Follow Through

in the US and he promoted Direct Instruction and behavioural approaches to teaching more generally. In 1976, Maggs was consultant to the House of Representatives Report into Children's Learning Difficulties. As noted in the MUSEC 2000 Retrospective, "Through his personal research, Dr Maggs had a pioneering influence on the use of direct instructional techniques in regular schools and was among the first to explore the use of computers in individualised instruction." Magg's colleagues also did ground-breaking work in the area of effective instruction for young children with Down Syndrome, led by Moira Pieterse. The early intervention program at Macquarie became a model of best practice and internationally acclaimed.

Our dear friend and eminent early interventionist, Dr Coral Kemp OAM (who returned to the Centre in 1991) was in the first intake into the Master of Arts in Special Education in 1975, taught primarily by Bernie Thorley and Greg Hotchkis. She writes:

There were not many of us (fewer than 15 from memory) and most had been given scholarships from the NSW Department of Education with the idea that they would become special education consultants. We covered Applied Behaviour Analysis, direct instruction, precision teaching, task analysis, match to sample and small 'n' research (the research for my Master's project was a multiple baseline study). We were also looking at the research on literacy and numeracy. Sue Bracey did the course at the same time as me and Margaret Goninan was doing her Master's

It is heartening to see that the principles of direct and explicit instruction have made their way into the contemporary education scene and are increasingly being widely deployed in classrooms in Australia to good effect.

honours in special education at that time. Moira Pieterse got the Down Syndrome program started with support from Bernie Thorley, so we could see a lot of the strategies we were being taught in practice.

Of course, further research and development of theory has continued

and colleagues from MUSEC over the years have added much to this. Kevin and Dr Mark Carter (who came to the Centre in 1991) continued to uphold the principles of applied behaviour analysis.

In 2000, applied behaviour analysis is still alive and well at MUSEC. But it is a different ABA from that practised in the early days of MUSEC. To use Wheldall and Carter's terminology from the title of their position paper, MUSEC has been 'reconstructing behaviour analysis in education' to reflect more fully conceptual advances over the past twenty years or so.

It is heartening to see that the principles of direct and explicit instruction have made their way into the contemporary education scene and are increasingly being widely deployed in classrooms in Australia to good effect. The appetite for the science of learning has certainly grown and we pay tribute to all those who are currently spreading the word about effective instruction. But let us not forget those on whose shoulders we have stood as we advance evidence-based teaching. These early pioneers were brave, often criticised and misunderstood. They were working in an era where constructivism was well and truly taking hold and became the prevailing zeitgeist. We owe much to these folk as we promote the cause of the science of teaching and learning. As we celebrate MultiLit's 30th anniversary in 2025, we are grateful for the work that has gone on before and for those pioneers whose messages of effective instruction are now being heard.

*Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall AM
and Dr Robyn Wheldall
Joint Editors*