

‘There’s something about Mary’ VATE honours Mary Mason with an Honorary (Life) Membership

Dr Amanda McGraw, Federation University

It is an absolute pleasure to present my special friend Mary Mason with a Life Membership of VATE. In doing so, I want to acknowledge her tireless commitment to the association over many years (she has been an active member of VATE for about 30 years) and the special contribution she has made to English teaching in this state.

I first met Mary in 1990. I had just been employed by VATE as their Education/Executive Officer and at that time Mary was a member of VATE Council. It was an amazing time to be in the VATE Office, then in Lygon St, Carlton. On the nights when Council and Committee meetings were scheduled, hordes of passionate English teachers, teacher educators, and a few interesting bureaucrats would descend on the double-storey terrace after long days teaching, to discuss the latest issues confronting Victorian English teachers—and together plan ways to make a difference. As a relatively young teacher, the experience of working at VATE at that time was incredible. Politically and educationally, it was a time of change as we moved into an era of greater bureaucratic control through national and state standards. English teachers, through VATE, were active in their desire to identify and hold on to key principles. More than anything, the people who gathered around tables at that time became firm friends and a strong network of influence.

There was something about Mary that made her a central part of that network. It was her intellectual hunger to learn and think deeply that made people stop and rethink rushed and pragmatic ideas. And it was her selflessness and her genuine care for others that made her a true friend in times of need. Her generosity of spirit and the calibre of her thinking meant that she was invited to be part of many key committees at that time including the English FOSC, the VCE text selection committee, and the exam setting panel for Literature. The thing about Mary is that she doesn’t sit back and sprout ideas: she participates, makes phone calls, sets up meetings, writes letters, takes action.

My first meeting with Mary is etched quite strangely in my mind. She was sitting in my chair at my desk waiting for a meeting to begin at the VATE office on a Wednesday evening. I remember noticing her auburn bob, her English accent and her Fair Isle cardigan. I also strangely remember wanting her to get out of my chair so that I could prepare some documents for a meeting. I’d come from teaching in a school where the power base was a group of terrifying female English teachers. And you didn’t sit in their chairs. Knowing Mary as I do now I understand that some of the superficial rituals and meaningless expectations we have of others (and which unfortunately permeate the world of education) mean little to Mary. The thing about Mary is that she comes to professional situations with a touch of naivety, lots of wisdom accumulated through years of deeply reading literature, and not afraid to show her vulnerability. These qualities mean that she does things in ways that others may not – and that she plans events as though anything is possible!

When Mary first became involved in VATE she was teaching English at MLC. Joining her professional association and wanting to play an active part in improving the teaching of English would have been a natural step for her. Having come to teaching after a career as a nurse, who

had spent time living and working overseas in England and Africa, Mary brought fresh eyes to our profession and ways of doing things that sometimes were at odds with usual practices. She used psycho-drama in her English classes and, with thoughtful and tentative skill, she helped students to embody characters and use their imaginations to delve deeply into ideas and value their own interpretations of texts. Mary once told me that she didn't really know her students personally. She didn't ask them about their weekends or about their personal interests. She connected with them in a space beyond the personal, in a world where possibility, shared curiosity, and a faith that through language they could make powerful discoveries, were more important. This was why she had such great success with her students: she built a culture of thinking in her classrooms where in collaborative ways she and her students made great discoveries.

The thing about Mary is that she models deep intellectual hunger—and she expects other teachers to have that same thirst for discipline knowledge. As Vice President of VATE in the early 1990s and member of the Professional Learning Committee, Mary organised many powerful professional learning activities for teachers. One of the most successful was a series of seminars based on critical theory run by Terry Threadgold and other Monash University academics. Her desire to enhance theory/practice connections led to many innovative opportunities where she brought teachers and university researchers together to tussle with big picture questions and concerns.

After being actively involved in planning VATE conferences, Mary and I convened the National AATE conference in 1996 and the keynotes were Julia Atkin, David Malouf and Gunter Kress. The way we do conferences in Victoria continues to be an eclectic and inspirational mix of teachers, researchers, writers, film-makers, rap artists, journalists, food critics, cartoonists, song writers sharing their stories and ideas—Mary has definitely left her creative mark on the way we do conferences here.

After teaching at MLC, Mary went to work at Wesley College and later to Geelong College. In both positions, she was responsible for learning and teaching—for changing culture. In her first appearance at Wesley, where she was introduced to the whole staff, she appeared on stage in brightly coloured stockings. She wasn't the typical suited-up leader you might expect to find in a prestigious independent school. Her intention was to shock people a little; to disrupt their everyday thinking; to enliven them by doing something unusual.

Mary offered teachers in both of these schools amazing opportunities to grow and learn. She nurtured people who took initiatives and came up with big ideas; she made it possible for people to meet together to talk about their teaching and make plans to do things differently. The thing about Mary is that what matters most is student learning—and she understands that when you give teachers time to dream and opportunities to learn deeply and work collaboratively, great things happen for kids.

During this time, Mary wasn't as actively involved in VATE but after she retired (of sorts), Mary came back to VATE Council with a force. In her second life as a VATE Council member and Co-convenor of the Professional Learning and Research Committee, Mary has been instrumental in developing and ensuring new processes and structures which enable VATE to operate in more effective ways. She has led the redevelopment of the VATE website helping the association to better meet future needs.

Over the last two years, Mary and I have worked together to develop and implement the VATE Community of Practice on Teaching Reading. Mary was instrumental in securing \$140,000 from the government to support this three-year professional learning initiative. It's been a powerful learning experience for all of us. Mary has worked as a critical friend with teachers from a number of schools some of whom say that their teaching has been completely reenergised and reconceptualised. The thing about Mary is that she rarely casts herself in the role of expert. When she works with teachers she provokes, challenges, questions—but always from a position of wanting to know more, wanting to do a better job, wanting the teaching of English in this state to be as meaningful as possible for young people. I have no doubt that VATE would be a very different professional teaching association without the influence of Mary Mason. And for that reason, this honour is so greatly deserved.