

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS



Obituary: Roland Meighan, Emeritus Professor, University of Nottingham, School of Education

By Emeritus Professor Clive Harber, School of Education, University of Birmingham

Roland Meighan was a Lecturer and then Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Birmingham before becoming a special Professor of Education at the University of Birmingham. At Birmingham University in the 1970s and 1980s Roland both ran a PGCE secondary teacher training course in social sciences and taught courses in the sociology of education.

Roland had a lifelong professional interest in humane and democratic alternatives to the existing nature of formal education that might take place within or outside of existing educational structures.

This influenced his practice so that, based on an idea put forward by Adam Curle, then Professor of Peace Education at Bradford University, Roland developed the idea of “democratic learning cooperatives” both on the teacher training programme and in his sociology of education courses at Birmingham University. These co-operatives were

where the students designed their own course as a group and implemented it with our help as senior learners.

This had a profound effect on the thinking of students as it immediately raised fundamental issues about the nature and purposes of education which questioned the assumptions of their previous experiences. Roland also became increasingly interested in the practice and theory of home-based education during this period and in the early 1980s was involved with one of the early court cases (the Harrison family) where a family’s right to educate their children at home was tested by the law. He was also active in *Education Otherwise*, the organisation run for and by people who are electively educating their children at home in the UK.

His writing on social science education and the sociology of education attracted the interest of the publishers Holt Rinehart who approached him about writing a book

on the sociology of education. The first edition of *A Sociology of Educating* was published in 1981 and was an immediate success and was sold globally. Despite having published many books and articles, it is still probably the book that Roland is best known for. Roland was particularly proud when it was translated into Polish. It has now been revised and reprinted five times. The title suggested its interactionist approach to sociology and, while being an introductory textbook, it nevertheless also introduced readers to alternative approaches to education and the ideas behind them.

Roland retired from full-time employment at the University of Birmingham in 1989 but continued for one day a week for three years. Towards the end of the 1980s Roland helped to establish the Education Now publishing cooperative and then later Educational Heretics Press and these were to become a major focus of his retirement. In the 1980's he had become increasingly concerned at the way mainstream publishers of books on education focussed solely on conventional education or the government agenda and he wanted to provide a publishing outlet for those more concerned with alternatives to existing patterns of formal schooling. He also wanted to try to reach a wider audience than academic writing permits. One of the first books published by Education Now was *Flexi-schooling* written by Roland himself in 1988 which examined how

education can become better suited to the complex, post-industrial world rather than the nineteenth century institutions that schools currently are. This was followed by a total of 91 other books up to 2010, all of which were in some way critical of existing provision and providing an alternative to it, whether in the form of more democratic education, home-based education or personalised education. A number of these such as *Damage Limitation*, *Comparing Learning Systems* and *The Freethinkers Guide to the Educational Universe* were written by Roland himself.

Through his own writing and his encouragement of others via Education Now and Educational Heretics Press, Roland has had a significant influence on the thinking of generations of those involved in education, whether in schools, higher education or otherwise—and whether or not people agreed with him, he made people think and his voice will be missed.

On a more personal note, one of Roland's strengths as a teacher and a human being was his sense of humour. It was a great pleasure to work with him as we moved seamlessly from jokes and humour, to serious discussion and back. Working with Roland was never boring and he was always full of interesting and provocative ideas. His relaxation included bird watching and jazz but he also loved certain humorous programmes on TV such as *Yes Minister*, *Drop the Dead Donkey* and *Jeeves and Wooster*.

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