Robert Fischer:
CALICO’s Gentleman-Scholar

Barbara A. Lafford
Arizona State University

Collegial, giving, respectful, and honest
Hardworking, dedicated, supportive, and professional
Inclusive, inquisitive, interested, and inviting

These are just some of the words that come to mind when CALICO members characterize Robert (Bob) Fischer, the man who served as Executive Director of the CALICO organization for 14 years (1997-2011). Incorporating personal reflections from current CALICO members and my own experience knowing Bob, in this essay I will attempt to sketch a profile of this multifaceted man for readers of this volume who may not have had the pleasure of meeting or interacting with him.

The bards Wordsworth and Robert Burns may have summed up Bob Fischer’s qualities best by juxtaposing the two terms: Scholar and Gentleman. Bob’s scholarly contributions in the field of CALL include an edited volume, book chapters, software documentation, and a number of articles that have appeared over the past three decades in leading pedagogical journals such as The French Review, Foreign Language Annals, IALL Journal of Language Learning Technologies, Computer Assisted Language Learning, and CALICO Journal. However, his most recognized contributions to this field have been his stellar leadership of the CALICO organization and his outstanding tenure as editor of the CALICO Journal.

Bob Fischer’s professionalism is evidenced in his tireless efforts to promote CALICO at national and international levels. After taking on the position as Executive Director of CALICO, Bonnie Youngs (Carnegie Mellon University) notes that Bob worked to get more presentations on CALL (still a fledgling field in the mid 1990s) included in more established professional conferences (e.g., American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages [ACTFL]). As the second decade of the 21st century dawns, CALL presentations abound at applied linguistics and foreign language pedagogy conferences of the first rank, and the peripatetic CALICO booth is a welcome fixture at meetings of national language associations (e.g., ACTFL, American Association of Teachers of French) and their regional affiliates (e.g., Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages [affiliate of ACTFL]). Bob spent several hours each day of those conferences at the booth fielding questions about CALICO with a welcoming smile. He also made a point of attending CALL conferences around the globe (e.g., EUROCALL) in
order to promote CALICO and strengthen the reputation of the organization and
the *CALICO Journal* abroad.

Under Bob’s direction, the *CALICO Journal* has flourished. Smith and Lafford’s (2009) survey of CALL professionals demonstrated that it is widely rec-
ognized as one of the most prestigious journals in the field of computer assisted
language learning. The journal, which transitioned to an online format just a few
years ago, also publishes a yearly monograph that focuses on themes that capture
the imagination of those interested in calling upon the affordances of technology
to enhance the acquisition of communicative competence in a second language
(e.g., CALL theory, research and teaching, distance language education, teacher
preparation, social networking and online collaboration, technology across writ-
ning contexts and tasks, CALL in limited contexts, present and future promises of
CALL).

Bob’s professionalism and dedication to his field have been noted in the follow-
ing thoughts from CALICO scholars:

Dorothy Chun (University of California, Santa Barbara):
I think the thing that amazed and impressed me the most about Bob was
that he always seemed calm, cool and collected even though he was al-
ways multi-tasking (editing the *CALICO Journal* singlehandedly, serv-
ing as Department Chair, running the CALICO conferences).

Karina and Joe Collentine (Northern Arizona University)
“Bob asking us to present a workshop for CALICO on research design to
aid up-and-coming scholars who were researching SLA in CALL. It was
a great way to share with others the steps we used in conducting research
that had a focus on CALL. We learned from them too!”

Bob’s dedication to the success of the CALICO conference was also evidenced
by his application of his exemplary organizational skills and eye for detail to as-
sure that every aspect of the annual conference ran smoothly; however, in his typi-
cally modest fashion, Bob readily admits that a large part of its success has been
and continues to be due to the work of his assistant, Esther Horn. In order to get a
sense of the overall positive impact of the conference experience for attendees and
presenters, Bob would take an interest in the quality of and reaction to each and
every presentation. Bob’s *modus operandi* was to try to attend at least part of as
many CALICO sessions as possible during the annual conference. While present,
he would listen intently to the presenter, darting his eyes around the room trying
to gauge the reaction of the audience to measure the quality of the material being
presented and the level of intellectual engagement taking place in that session.

This professional concern for the experiences of all the participants in the CAL-
ICO conference also evidences his gentlemanly qualities. Bob can be counted
among the very few Executive Directors of large organizations that try to take the
time to get to know as many conference attendees as possible at that organiza-
tion’s annual conference. In every respect, his collegial attitude and respect for all
CALICO participants (regardless of academic rank) lives up to Kipling’s measure
of a man, i.e., walking with kings without losing the common touch. This spirit of
inclusion is seen in Bob’s openness and desire to include new people in CALICO
activities. Each year before the opening session, Bob and the CALICO board would hold a Newcomer’s meeting to welcome first-time CALICO attendees and to make himself and the board members available to those who have questions or who are making their first tentative step into becoming part of the CALL community of practice. Bob’s genius could also be seen in his engagement with new and established CALICO attendees during the conference breaks and the fact that he often invited newcomers to have lunch or dinner with him and more seasoned CALICO scholars. All these activities help to foster collegiality among all CALICO participants, to make new intellectual connections among the members of different “generations” of CALL scholars, and will help to ensure the longevity and vibrance of the organization for years to come.

Above all the gentlemanly gifts that Bob has given to the CALICO organization, the greatest gift has been the sharing of his time and his friendship with the CALICO members. Bob’s concern for the well-being and professional development of all CALICO members has been noted by the following CALL scholars:

Steve Thorne (University of Portland, University of Gröningen):
From my first interactions with Bob in the late 1990s, he has been generous of spirit, encouraging, and supportive. Through Bob’s tireless stewardship of the organization and journal, the CALICO community has incubated young scholars and pushed established colleagues to new levels of professionalism. Perhaps most importantly, Bob has inspired in me and many others the confidence to explore, to take risks, and to use empirics to support intuitive as well as iconoclastic analyses within the field of CALL. In a real sense, CALL enthusiasts and researchers are indebted to Bob Fischer as one of the primary catalysts for establishing the rich and dynamic community within which we now thrive.

Julie Sykes (University of New Mexico):
The thing I remember most about working with Bob was his willingness to ALWAYS help me when I was a graduate student. It never even mattered to him that I was just a graduate student and he always took the time to help me edit, publish, and do good research.

In sum, Bob Fischer exemplifies the qualities of a gentleman, as defined by some of our greatest minds. George Bernard Shaw believed that a gentleman was “one who puts more into the world than he takes out” while Benjamin Disraeli considered the two main characteristics of a gentleman to be “propriety of manners and consideration for others.” In an uncanny fashion, Oliver Goldsmith, an 18th century Anglo-Irish writer and poet, actually presaged Bob’s embodiment of the term when he said “To make a fine gentleman, several trades are required, but chiefly a barber.”

I will end this tribute to Bob Fischer with further words used by CALICO members when describing this gentleman-scholar:
Kind, compassionate, good sense of humor, winning smile
Grace under pressure
Above all, a true servant, who takes joy and pride in being of service to colleagues and the profession.

REFERENCE