

## Canadian Philosophy of Education Remembers Paul O'Leary

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[See table of contents](#)

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# *Canadian Philosophy of Education Remembers Paul O’Leary*

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## **Editor’s Note**

It was with sadness that I learned this spring that our founding editor, Paul O’Leary, had died. I had met Paul at our Canadian Philosophy of Education Society (CPES) conferences, and I had often found myself thinking about his excellent work as editor as I selected articles from our back catalogue for our “From the Archives” feature. *Paidensis*, as the journal was then called, published a great deal of excellent work under Paul’s editorship, and now that I have become an editor myself, I have much more appreciation for his work in founding and editing the journal. Paul faced significant challenges that *Philosophical Inquiry in Education’s* current editors do not: He and the rest of his team had to figure out how launch a journal from scratch, deal with the challenges of the print format, and sustain interest in a fledgling publication. Paul clearly worked hard to do this. In 1987’s inaugural issue, he wrote:

*Paidensis’s* purpose is to stimulate a conspicuous Canadian presence in the field and to facilitate scholarly communication among those seriously interested in philosophy of education. While the journal’s focus is philosophical, it will not function as a closed shop in which only those who are “certified” philosophers of education can work. Indeed, we hope that the journal will be read and contributed to by those who, although not formally philosophers of education, are nonetheless drawn to philosophical problems by virtue of their work in areas such as curriculum, psychology, law and sociology.

Thirty years later, we still remain true to this original mission. Paul titled his inaugural editorial, “That the First Shall Not Be the Last,” and thanks to the support of the Canadian philosophy of education community, the journal is still going strong.

To recognize and remember Paul, we have decided to print a selection of tributes to him that were compiled by Sandra Bruneau and presented at the 2017 meeting of CPES.

–David Waddington, on behalf of the editorial team of  
*Philosophical Inquiry in Education*

## **Introduction**

Dr. Paul O’Leary passed away on March 30, 2017 in London, Ontario, in his eighty-fifth year. During his thirty-year tenure as professor of education at the University of Western Ontario’s Faculty of Education, he was a very active member of CPES. Paul regularly presented papers at CPES meetings, responded to others’ papers, and engaged in ongoing debates and discussions on a wide range of issues. Paul also served on the CPES Executive, and was the founding editor of the journal *Paidensis*. He was

always at the centre of merriment whenever philosophers of education came together. We shall miss him greatly as will his family members with whom he was very close.

Below is a collection of warm memories of Paul O'Leary by his CPES colleagues.

–Sandra Bruneau

### **Bill Hare, Mount Saint Vincent University (Halifax)**

My friendship with Paul O'Leary goes back some forty years to the mid-1970s when we first teamed up at the Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE) conference to attend sessions together. From that point on, we were constant companions at the annual meetings. Paul took conference attendance very seriously. He was loath to miss a single CPES session, and his dedication helped to make my own attendance record better than it might otherwise have been. When I was ready to call it a day, Paul would convince me that we had it in us to take in one more paper!

Paul was the soul of generosity as far as the sessions were concerned. The idea of trashing a paper or a talk was completely anathema to him. He always found something of interest or, more precisely, something puzzling in the presentation; something he wanted to go on thinking about. Over dinner each evening, he would come back to whatever had caught his attention and try out a reaction or two. Any presenter would be fortunate indeed to have someone like Paul in the audience. The same positive yet critical approach to the work of others is also evident in Paul's published book reviews where his fair-mindedness ensures that scoring points and putting others down have no place.

The word “seriously” above may have occasioned some concern as to whether I am speaking of the Paul O'Leary friends and colleagues knew so well! Paul, of course, was someone for whom the words “funny” and “witty” were coined. He was an old-style raconteur, with a seemingly endless supply of stories, tales, and anecdotes, all to be told in rich detail in his inimitable manner. And they were just as good the second or third time around! Paul would look at you quizzically and ask: Did I ever tell you the one about such-and-such? And I confess that I sometimes said I wasn't sure, just to hear the story again. He was always delighted to oblige!

There was always time to explore whatever city the conference happened to be in, and for Paul, a visit was nothing if not an adventure. He had invariably done his homework and there was a building or a place that just had to be seen and explored. With Paul on hand, it was rather like having your own personal travel guide. In later years, Pia came along, and Niki too, and the four of us would set off for a day's adventure. There was a memorable visit to Quebec City in 2001, and a wonderful day together in Waterloo in 2012.

That was the same year that Paul received the Distinguished Service Award from CPES, a tribute that was fully deserved, as the enthusiastic response at the dinner that evening underscored. It was a fitting recognition of all that Paul had done over many years for our society and for our field. He will be deeply missed by all who knew him.

Paul made a number of very valuable contributions to the literature on philosophy of education over the years. He had a longstanding interest in the problem of indoctrination and, in his early work in this area, he developed a persuasive account of what is at the heart of the outlook of the indoctrinated person and why such a state of mind amounts to miseducation. In more recent work, very much inspired by C.S. Peirce, Paul argued that indoctrination violates the norms of fallible inquiry, and he

proposed that teachers seek to develop the virtue of epistemic prudence in their students. Not surprisingly, we find in Paul's published essays an ongoing preoccupation with moral education where he critically explores fundamental questions about the centrality of the ethical virtues and their acquisition. In his engaging memoir, he drew our attention to the increasingly precarious place of philosophy of education in teacher education programs while showing us just how important that place is.

He was entirely modest about his own accomplishments and it is inconceivable to think of Paul boasting about anything. Nevertheless, the wealth of reading he could draw on in conversation often made me wonder how well I was keeping up. His published work reveals a rich background in history of philosophy and a deep acquaintance with contemporary philosophy and philosophy of education. Paul was a philosopher of education who kept in close touch with recent work in general philosophy with something of a taste, it seemed to me, for the difficult and the complex.

Paul had a splendid study in his home that I admired very much, with floor-to-ceiling shelves crammed with the philosophy books he cherished. I never actually saw him at work there, of course; visits to his home were for relaxation, conversation, and fine wine. But a picture forms in my mind of Paul at his desk, surrounded by his books, hard at work on a manuscript, scribbling away, as he would put it himself, and looking up from time to time with a puzzled expression. Another question, another problem! More work to be done!

### **Don Cochrane, University of Saskatchewan (Saskatoon)**

At the 1986 CSSE conference held at the Université de Montréal, a number of us in philosophy of education complained that we were limited to reading foreign journals and publishing abroad because we did not have an academic journal of our own. Did we lack the confidence to produce one ourselves? Some of us thought we had come of age and resolved to put the matter right—and soon.

The next year at our CPES meeting at McMaster University, I presented a plan for a Canadian journal of philosophy of education. It would be produced by a team of two—an editor and a managing editor—and appear twice a year. The journal would be financed from members' dues and whatever library subscriptions we could hustle. Murray Elliott offered to write—very successfully as it turned out—to deans of education across Canada appealing for support to launch this new journal. (Some of our readers today may not be old enough to remember when deans actually had discretionary budgets.)

One of our colleagues worried that the costs of the journal could seriously erode our CPES funds to the point where it might result in the elimination of our free conference breakfast—our only other major society expense! It was agreed that the journal would not cost more than three dollars per issue to produce. For twelve years, the journal stayed within budget, and our free early-morning breakfasts continued without interruption.

The most contentious issue was what to call our offspring. I proposed *First Intuitions, Second Thoughts*, for which the acronym would be *FIST*. I had in mind a rather radical publication, something a little in-your-face, and featuring a few set-pieces and much short commentary—sort of blogging before there was the technology to blog. Some worried about the connotations of “fist” in the verb form, and so, more conservative minds prevailed. Paul O'Leary proposed the journal be called *Paidensis*. I suspect that only he knew what it meant; no one else could even pronounce it, much less spell it (certainly not

library subscription agents from Alabama, who would phone me as managing editor from time to time to ask after the whereabouts of a particular issue). For these reasons among others, Paul was appointed our first editor.

Our first issue appeared six months later in the fall of 1987. Have academics ever moved more quickly? The issue filled exactly fifty-two pages, a Procrustean bed imposed on us by Canada Post. That number of pages, the cover, and an envelope was the most we could mail and still stay within the lowest possible postage rate. One more sheet—four more pages—and members might miss their CPES conference breakfasts.

I had the pleasure of serving as the managing editor for three wonderful editors—Paul O’Leary, Bill Hare, and John Portelli—from 1987 to 1999. We worked hard together for those twelve years and, as I look back on the first twenty-four issues, I think we can be proud of the start we made.

Having moved to an online version, the readership has greatly expanded and some of those early ideas about first intuitions and second thoughts are now being realized.

### **Michelle Forrest, Mount Saint Vincent University (Halifax)**

Remembering Paul O’Leary is a joy—because of what he helped dispel in my thinking and because of what he generated. Before I had the pleasure of getting to know Professor O’Leary, I witnessed him responding to someone’s paper in a CPES session. When I heard Paul sum things up in Aristotelian terms and reframe the question such that everyone in the room took note, I figured I’d joined the wrong society. My teacher and dissertation supervisor, Bill Hare, must have exaggerated when he said I’d find CPES very welcoming. How could they possibly welcome me, I thought, so woefully lacking in knowledge of the classics and unable to fully appreciate the nuanced response from a classically-trained philosopher like Paul? That was my first conference, in Ottawa. Sandra Bruneau and Sheryle Bergmann-Drewe welcomed me warmly, doubtless pleased to see another woman in CPES sessions. After that introduction, my curiosity overcame my trepidation enough to get me to my second CPES conference, in Quebec City.

This was where I first met Paul and Pia, the adventurers. Bill and Niki Hare were going to dinner with them and invited me along. Pia and Paul knew a restaurant within the walls of Old Quebec where they served authentic *habitant* cuisine. So, for my introduction to Paul and Pia I found myself sitting in a low-ceilinged *habitant* house, at a rough-hewn table, supping on things I had read about in grade six history: pemmican, and other *coureur-de-bois* delicacies best forgotten, insofar as my unadventurous palate is concerned. Nonetheless, I tried everything, including keeping up with the tenor of the philosophically-allusive conversation. Though I need never try pemmican again, I have not stopped leaping into philosophical discussions over dinner. My dear Mom used to say, “Never discuss religion or politics at the dinner table!” She left out philosophy, which means I follow Paul’s congenial lead with impunity.

My most vivid lingering image of Paul, however, is from a more recent CPES conference, from the time when Pia had graciously offered to serve as the Society’s official photographer. Paul must have had some mobility issues that year because he trekked about the conference rooms with the niftiest pair of walking sticks I have ever seen; each had a built-in headlight. (I always meant to ask if they had a horn or bell.) I’m left with this picture of leprechaun-like Paul climbing back down into the cave to

convince those obstinate prisoners there is more to meet the eye than flickering images on a wall, and armed with his trusty walking sticks to illuminate their escape from ignorance. It worked on me. Why not on them?

Thanks, Paul. I bet you're giving those early Christians a hard time for misinterpreting Aristotle, leading them in your inimitable way gently and mischievously to the light.

### **Doug Stewart, University of Regina (Regina)**

Knowing Paul as a fellow traveller in philosophy of education and as a good friend for many years has been a rare and wonderful privilege.

Thank goodness for our annual CPES conferences and for the opportunities they provide to meet and get to know our colleagues from across Canada; to see them in action and learn of their research interests, to discuss and debate issues and ideas with them and to enjoy their company. Paul was at his best in these matters especially during his many presentations at our annual meetings when his acuity of mind, his quick wit, robust sense of humour, and his enjoyment of good conversation were all on full display—and not just during formal sessions but between and after these as well.

Along with several others, notably Don Cochrane and Murray Elliot, Paul played a crucial role in launching CPES's journal in the late 1980s, first by his willingness to serve as the journal's inaugural chief editor, and by his perseverance in seeing the journal through its early years of publication when it was important to get things right—which he did. But he had a surprise up his sleeve as well, and that was the rather ingenious title of *Paidensis* he selected for the journal (which later became informally but fondly referred to as “Pai”). At first many of us wondered what the term meant but in retrospect I dare say there was more than a little harmless devilment in Paul's choice of title, as well as a clear nod to our philosophical heritage.

Paul and I believed, rightly or wrongly, we were the only two members of CPES who had studied engineering in our undergraduate years before we became smitten by the study of philosophy. Neither of us, as it turned out, was very good at the former—Paul had dropped out of engineering as an undergraduate and I squeaked through only by the skin of my teeth. We nonetheless had good fun relishing in the rather preposterous thought that, having taken up the pursuit of philosophy as a second career after engineering, and primarily analytic philosophy in particular, we were following in the footsteps of none other than Wittgenstein himself!

In May 2012 at the Society's annual banquet in Waterloo, Ontario, Paul was recognized for his major contributions over many years to the philosophy of education when he was presented with CPES's Distinguished Service Award. It was justly deserved. That same evening, I was given the DSA as well. What a wonderful honor it was to share that occasion with Paul.

**Doug Simpson, Texas Christian University, formerly Memorial University of  
Newfoundland**

Getting to know Paul O’Leary, of course, was much more challenging than it was coming to recognize him or his presence. From the first time I saw and met him, he was nearly always obvious even during his infrequent quiet moments. His robust voice, outgoing demeanor, contagious friendliness, exuberance, witty remarks, penetrating questions, enlightening comments, and penchant for storytelling stamped my impression of Paul during the ‘70s. He was almost immediately unforgettable. Actually, he probably was immediately unforgettable. No matter how vigorously and artfully I tried, I failed to make him unnoticeable. Thus, I was virtually forced into expanding my knowledge of him. Consequently, I moved beyond merely recognizing Paul to getting to know him somewhat during what I call this early recognition period.

Several experiences were instrumental in my gaining a deeper knowledge and understanding of Paul. I first recognized that by just listening and asking questions I could access his considerable portable library, use his thoughts without fear of recall, and keep my professional development expenses low. Second, I was impressed with his generous spirit, his inclination to contribute unobtrusively to one’s formation of ideas, and his interest in others’ success, not consumed with his own.

In short, Paul, as a consumer of rich philosophical literature, a master of fine arguments, a cultivator of great friendships, a connoisseur of living well, and a loving partner of Pia, made it easy to appreciate the unique person he was and the contributions he has made to the field, society and journal. He and Pia have enabled many to taste more consistently, comprehensively, and freely a growing, flourishing life.

**Sandra Bruneau, Association of BC Deans of Education (ABCDE)**

My first meeting with Paul O’Leary was an indicator of many to come: humorous, substantive, sympathetic, encouraging. That CSSE meeting took place in 1975, hosted by the University of Alberta, but located in a downtown hotel conference area with rooms designated for CPES. I was a doctoral student in Philosophy of Education at the University of British Columbia (UBC), studying with Jerrold Coombs, Leroi Daniels, and Murray Elliott. Leroi had encouraged me to contribute to the CPES program that year by offering a response to Paul O’Leary’s “Education and the Obligation to Educate.” With courage (or bravado) in hand, I agreed. I prepared a written response to Paul’s paper and sent my first draft by snail mail to the Program Chair. Off I went to Edmonton.

The hotel conference room was very small, very crowded and very warm. We were at the front, just knees away from an intimidating group of established professors of education, which included (if memory serves me correctly) Jim Covert, Foster Walker, Nirmal Bhattacharya, Ivan de Faveri, Eamonn Callan, Allan Pearson, John McNeill, Joan Munro, two of my UBC professors, and others. I tried not to let my younger nerves show. Paul, my seatmate, was very welcoming, reassuring, a model of calm competence. He did lean over and ask quietly whether it was my intention to demolish his

arguments and I replied, “Well yes of course, Professor O’Leary! Isn’t that what is expected of us?!” He chuckled with a go-ahead-and-give-it-a-try gesture.

And so I did. When he finished his presentation, I took a deep breath and read out my five pages. After reading my last line with a flourish, the room erupted in clapping and laughter. I was a little horrified. Uh-oh. Was I *that* bad?! Discussion immediately followed with everyone chiming in. Many thought I’d made incisive points, destructive even. Amid good-natured jabs and comments, Paul took it all well. With a twinkle and an Irish hoot, he acknowledged that he would have to go back and rethink some of his arguments. Success? We had both added a little to the detritus that lay before us. Lunch that day was spelled “relief”!

From that moment on, I came to experience how very collegial, encouraging, sympathetic, and helpful Paul could be. I met him at successive conferences and we’d always share our latest philosophical pursuits and thoughts about current affairs and familial events. At least once, Paul replied to a paper of mine, after which I’d have to admit he had forced me to rethink my categories and strategic argument moves. What’s good for the goose, *etcetera*.

No account of *Life with Paul* can fully capture the extent of Paul’s CPES good will, his sense of academic collegiality, and his mischievous humour. Important too that I always learned philosophy of education content and methods from Paul—from his grasp of Greek philosophy through to the Enlightenment to his comments on current writings on critical theory and critical thinking.

It has also been a special treat for all of us to meet Paul’s wife and best friend, Pia O’Leary, at CPES conferences, and to dine and kibbitz with the two of them. In CPES we are especially grateful to Pia, who was declared to be the first Official Photographer of CPES, and who continues to capture and share photos of CPES members and friends, group events, and surroundings. We wish her well in the years ahead; Pia will sorely miss her partner as we will dearly miss our colleague and mentor.