

David Little (1995–2000)

Some memories from the second CercleS presidency (1995–2000)

I was elected president of CercleS in 1994, at the international conference hosted by Gertrud Aub-Buscher at the University of Hull, though my term of office began only in 1995. The founders of CercleS decided that the officers should be elected for a three-year term that could be renewed once; at the same time, they decided to hold an international conference every second year. This meant that the officers elected in 1992 would have to be re-elected or replaced in 1995. At the Hull conference the serving officers suddenly realised that they must hold elections immediately: without a conference the following year it would be impossible to bring the electorate together. A general meeting was hastily arranged for the last evening of the conference. I had been a member of DULC (Directors of University Language Centres in the UK and Ireland) from the beginning and had attended the Bordeaux conference at which CercleS was founded. But I wasn't in any sense an active member of either organisation, and I was surprised when two colleagues cornered me in the bar and urged me to stand for election as president. Without a very clear idea of what being president would entail, I agreed and was elected. David Bickerton (University of Plymouth) was elected Secretary General.

In the year between being elected and taking office, David and I had a couple of meetings with some of the serving officers to better inform ourselves of the state CercleS was in. The full members of CercleS are national associations of university language centres, of which at that time there were only six. It was clear that CercleS must either grow quickly or perish; and in order to grow we needed to make two adjustments to existing practice. First, we adopted a flexible interpretation of "full member", because it quickly became clear that in some cases membership of CercleS was a precondition for establishing a national association; and second, we reduced the term of office from three to two years, so that future elections would always be held at an international conference. By the time I left office the number of full members had more than doubled.



During my five years as president I managed to attend the annual

meetings of most national associations, though I missed my first international conference, hosted by Bernd Voss in Dresden in 1996, because I was recovering from appendicitis. In the early years university language centres often struggled to achieve parity of esteem with academic departments: it was widely assumed that they provided a service that was wholly unrelated to research and mainstream academic life. When we were setting up the Centre for Language and Communication Studies at Trinity College Dublin at the end of the 1970s, we sought advice from John Trim, who was then head of the Department of Linguistics at the University of Cambridge and responsible for one of the first university language centres in the UK. He urged us to ensure that whatever we did to support language learning would be closely associated with a coherent programme of research. Fortunately, Trinity College allowed me to follow that advice. Yet parity of esteem remains a problem for many language centres (I address this issue in the article I contributed to the 30th-anniversary issue of *Language Learning in Higher Education*). All the same, three decades on from its foundation, CercleS is evidently flourishing, and its journal is receiving healthy numbers of submissions. The insecurities of youth lie in the past and comfortable – though not, I hope, complacent – middle age beckons.

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