



In Memory and Tribute

Michael Pressley (1951–2006) ☆

1. Introduction

On a peaceful night in May of this year, Michael Pressley passed away while asleep in his study chair at home in Michigan. Three times earlier, starting in his 20s, he had prevailed against his most persistent adversary—cancer. He was unable to overcome this foe in their final match.

It is almost impossible to imagine Mike passing away in his sleep, mainly because he needed so little of it, only about four hours a night. Those extra waking hours were not spent idly. His passion and work ethic were so strong that even when he was “on the road,” at a conference, sharing a room with a friend, such as his editor Chris Jennison, he would quietly rise in the middle of the night and go to work, thinking, reading, writing, and communicating (via e-mail) with students and colleagues.

Mike was an academic athlete, possessing strength, agility, and endurance. For example, his intellectual strengths served him well in the early 1990s, when he turned his attention more fully to the study of literacy. He immersed himself in the library at the University of Maryland and consumed everything he could on reading development and reading instruction. In six weeks, Mike had a good handle on a very large and diverse literature. His grasp of this field was so strong that he became a major player almost immediately. He accomplished this task in a short period of time because of his incredible ability to absorb, organize, evaluate, and restructure new information.

Mike was also intellectually agile. In a time when most academics limit their pursuits to a single area, he was a renaissance scholar. Michael made seminal contributions in the areas of memory development (e.g., Brainerd & Pressley, 1985; Pressley & Schneider, 1997; Schneider & Pressley, 1989), cognitive strategy instruction (Pressley & Levin, 1983a, 1983b; Pressley & Brainerd, 1985), reading comprehension (e.g., Block & Pressley, 2002), attributes of effective literacy instruction (e.g., Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001), and motivation (e.g., Pressley et al., 2003). His interest and knowledge were not limited to these specific areas; he consumed the literature broadly. When we first met Mike in the 1980s, he immediately wanted to know what we did (not an

☆ Note: We drew the information in this paper from our interactions with Michael Pressley and his family, his publications, recollections of his friends, a testimonial written by Mary Lundeberg (his department chair at Michigan State University), and a letter from Gloria Miller and others to Michael’s wife, Donna, and son, Tim.

unusual experience for those meeting Mike for the first time). We told him we were interested in writing, how it develops and how to teach it. We spent the next two hours talking about the writing literature, and we were amazed that someone who was not doing research in this area would be so familiar with it.

Mike's intellectual agility extended to the research tools he used. Early in his career, he designed research that primarily involved true experimental designs (Pressley, 1976). As his interests and experiences expanded, Mike began to apply other tools, including quasi-experimental designs (Brown, Pressley, Van Meter, & Schuder, 1996) and qualitative research methods (Bogner, Raphael, & Pressley, 2002). He strongly believed that researchers need to use a variety of research tools and that they should use the best methodology available to answer the most pressing questions of the day. Both in action and in print (see, for example, Pressley, Graham, & Harris, 2006) he championed the use of a multi-methods approach to the study of education.

One of Mike's most obvious attributes was his energy and endurance. Not only did he make good use of those extra waking hours in the night, but his daylight hours packed a wallop as well. He didn't waste time. He stayed focused and energized, whether he was at the office, working at home, or on the road. This was most visible when he attended professional conferences. He never stopped. Throughout the day and into the evening, he attended sessions, participating fully in them, asking questions and offering opinions. When he was not in sessions, he was talking with others, finding out what they were doing, offering advice, and introducing them to others. He loved academic exchanges and spent a good deal of his time going to meetings and conferences where he was able to learn more, meet other academics, and engage in debate.

Mike made good use of his academic strengths, agility, and endurance. He was one of the most influential educational researchers of the last 25 years. Our purpose in this paper is to honor not only his accomplishments but also the man.

2. The quantitative facts

It is not easy to capture the essence of any person. In fact, it may be impossible. We will do our best by approaching Mike from several different directions. The first approach, which is particularly fitting, given Mike's lifelong involvement with numbers and quantitative research, is to provide an objective accounting of some of his professional accomplishments. These include, but are not limited to:

3 Journals edited:

Applied Cognitive Psychology (co-editor)
Journal of Reading Behavior (co-editor)
Journal of Educational Psychology (editor)

7 Universities positions:

University of Wisconsin (postdoctoral position)
California State University–Fullerton
University of Western Ontario
University of Maryland
State University of New York–Albany
University of Notre Dame
Michigan State University

- 8 Major awards:
 - Early Contribution Award (American Psychological Society)
 - Sylvia Scribner Award (American Educational Research Association)
 - Albert B. Harris Award (International Reading Association)
 - Oscar Causey Award (National Reading Conference)
 - Reading Hall of Fame membership
 - Thorndike Award (American Psychological Society)
 - University Distinguished Professor (Michigan State University)
 - University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development Distinguished 100 Alumni Award
- 14 Authored books
- 16 Graduated doctoral students
- 19 Edited books
- 100+ Colleagues who co-authored papers and books with Mike
- 350+ Published papers

In addition, Mike was one of the most cited scientists in education. He was in the top one-half of 1% of scholars cited in the research literature. Over the course of his career he consulted with the White House, Congress, National Institutes of Health, and the United States Department of Education. He was also a senior author on the basal literacy program, *Open Court*, and the chair of the 2003 panel that revised the *Michigan's Grade-Level Content Expectations in English Language Arts*. The *Expectations* are considered among the very best in the country.

These accomplishments buttress some points we already made—namely, Mike was a very productive scholar, with a lot of energy and broad impact. They also add additional texture to our picture of Michael. He labored in the trenches. Not only did he develop a substantial body of scholarly work, but he was committed to translating his research and the research of others into practice. This extended beyond his work on *Open Court* and *Michigan's Grade-Level Content Expectations* to the development of an impressive array of books and articles specifically for teachers. In recent years, this included a column on literacy that he and Nell Duke at Michigan State University did for *Instructor* magazine, one of the leading journals for teachers, as well as his involvement with the PBS television series *Reading Rockets*. As the director of the Literacy Achievement Research Institute at Michigan State University, he also sponsored conferences on literacy instruction for administrators and teachers, done in conjunction with the National Geographic Society. Perhaps most importantly, he loved being in schools, and no matter where he hung his academic cap, he was constantly visiting classrooms, talking with teachers, and seeking to find the very best instruction.

3. The qualitative themes

While the statistics summarizing Michael's accomplishments are impressive, they provide limited insight into the scholar and the man. To construct a fuller picture, we thought about our experiences with Mike as well as the stories others have told us about him. We drew from these remembrances six themes. Each theme is characterized by a one or two word adjective. Although our approach does not possess the same sophisti-

cation and rigor as the qualitative research conducted by Michael, it does make our picture more complete.

3.1. Collegial

Mike loved people—talking with them, visiting them, and working with them. It is this last quality that we explore here. Much of Mike’s work involved collaboration. All but two or three of his books (authored and edited) were a collaborative effort, and most of his papers included multiple authors.

These collaborations were typically initiated by Mike. In our case, he often called or e-mailed in the evening, asking if we were interested in working with him on a particular project or paper. We rarely said no because the offers were always interesting and Mike made a good case for each of them. Some version of this scenario played out with a large number of people, including long-standing friends, new acquaintances and students.

While his collegiality provides one explanation for his high level of productivity, this explanation must be tempered by the fact that he operated at a different speed than the rest of us. When writing a paper with Mike, you often felt as though you were constantly playing catch-up. He was so efficient and fast that he would have his section of a paper done before you had the chance to start on your part. Before you could get him feedback on the section he just sent you, another draft of it would arrive via e-mail. This difference in pacing always seemed to work out though, as he just kept plugging away on revising his sections (and yours) until you were done.

One reason so many people collaborated with Mike was that he was so dependable. If he told you he would get something done, it got done, and done well. He was also an incredible sounding board and source for additional information. His impact extended way beyond the papers and books he authored, as people were constantly asking him for advice or feedback on studies or projects they were planning. In our experience, he gave freely of his time.

3.2. Courageous

To quote Mary Lundeberg, Mike’s department chair at Michigan State University, he “was fearless.” This was most evident in his fights with cancer. If Mike ever questioned “why me” or was bitter about his reoccurring illnesses, his friends never knew it. During each of his bouts with cancer, he kept a positive attitude, exhaustively researching treatments, talking with experts, and then clinically describing to others how the battle would be waged. He was always optimistic, and when it was certain that the end was at hand, he was thankful for the time he had and what he accomplished with it. Cancer never owned Mike.

In his professional life, he was just as resolute. When whole language was the predominate approach to reading instruction, Mike never flinched in championing a more balanced approach to instruction—one that valued more explicit and systematic instruction as part of the learning process. The debate over the merits and weaknesses of whole language was often acrimonious, as those on both sides of the issues were demonized by some for their beliefs. This did not dissuade Michael in the least; he joined the fray without worrying about personal consequences (see [Pressley, 1994](#)).

In more recent years, he served as the counterpoint to Reid Lyon, education advisor to President Bush. Mike was critical of a number of government policies enacted during the Bush presidency, including the No Child Left Behind act. There are many who would have shied away from this conflict, but not Mike (Pressley, Duke, & Boling, 2004). Whether you agreed or disagreed with him, it was never any mystery where he stood. It was further clear that if he thought something was unjust or inequitable, he would confront it.

3.3. Committed

Mike was committed to education. While this same descriptor can be applied to most people who work in the field, Mike was off the charts. One of the things he loved most in life was Disney and especially the Disney cruises that his family and friends took at Christmas every year. Most people put aside professional obligations and worries during such vacations. That was not in Mike's nature. If he met a crew member or someone else who was bright and promising, he was off and running, recruiting them into education. No one was overlooked in this talent hunt. Even when he was recuperating in the hospital after an operation or chemotherapy, he recruited the nurses into his beloved profession.

Mike was committed to children and the concept of social justice. He strongly believed that society should treat all children equally well. One intriguing reflection of this commitment was the Master of Education Program he developed at Notre Dame University. This program recruited bright young men and women who made a commitment to teach in very impoverished neighborhoods, such as Watts in the Los Angeles area. During the program, students lived together in a community house in the neighborhoods where they taught during the academic year. In the summer, they returned to Notre Dame to an intensive series of courses and practicum. We had the opportunity to meet some of these students in one of our visits to Notre Dame, and found their commitment and belief in education energizing.

It is impossible to paint a picture of Mike without including his commitment to family and faith. Mike was fiercely devoted to his wife, Donna, and his son, Tim. By the same token, they were equally committed to him. Donna and Mike met at an American Educational Research Conference in the Los Angeles area. They skipped a day of the conference and had their first date at Disneyland (this may explain why he liked Disney so much). This started a lifelong love affair, lasting more than 25 years. During this time, Donna civilized Mike, as he had lived out of boxes instead of dresser drawers and other normal furniture before they were married. In the process of supporting Mike (through health and sickness) and raising a family, she set aside a promising academic career. The renowned psychologist Donald Meichenbaum told us that she was one of the brightest doctoral students he had ever met.

Perhaps one of the greatest testimonials to Mike's career is that his son, Tim, plans to work in the same field as his father. Tim is now a sophomore at Texas Christian University and is interested in pursuing a career in early childhood education.

Mike embraced the Catholic faith as an adult. He did not flaunt his faith nor did he encourage others to believe as he did. He did, however, believe strongly, and his faith brought him much peace.

3.4. Learned

When it came to books, Mike had a huge appetite. Eight years ago, when he took a position at Notre Dame, he asked Father Scully if the university would cover his moving

expense, including transporting his books. The good father should have asked a few more questions before saying yes, as Mike had 17 tons of books. Our best estimate at this point is that there are 25 tons of books in the library he built at his home in East Lansing, Michigan.

We recently had a chance to browse the Pressley collection. As you might expect, it is very deep in areas such as educational psychology, memory, reading, and research methods. What most captured our attention though was how broad it was, including seminal works and handbooks in a wide variety of academic areas as well as large collection of poetry and many books on spirituality (an aspect of the “commitment” theme we just explored).

When somebody has this many books, you wonder if they have actually read them. While we can't say for certain that he read all of them, he certainly read many of them. His voracious appetite for books reflected a more serious condition, however. Mike was an information junky. Outside of poetry, he only read expository material. If he needed to know more about something, such as a friend's illness, or became interested in a specific topic, he was a master at finding the needed information and separating the wheat from the chaff. Consequently, Mike was able to converse intelligently about a wide array of topics.

Perhaps the most impressive feature of Michael's knowledge was that it was so readily available to him. When he was first being recruited to take a position at Notre Dame, he flew to Jackson, Mississippi, to observe several of the Notre Dame students teaching in schools in impoverished neighborhoods there. As is sometimes the case, the first teacher candidate observed had a terrible time. While observing the next teacher candidate, Mike developed a comprehensive evaluation plan for assessing practicum students as well as a curriculum outline for their professional development. Surely all of us could have done the same thing, but most of us would have required more time to think and to access other resources to be sure that our ideas were complete. Mike was our favorite information source. We called him frequently to see what he knew about a particular topic and to identify the leading researchers in that area. He rarely needed to get back to us.

3.5. Unfashionably fashionable

When we first met Mike, he always had on a bow tie. No one else we knew or saw wore a bow tie, and we doubt that anyone else was actually interested in sporting such an accoutrement! To this day, if we see a bow tie, we think of Mike.

Mike's unfashionably fashionable clothing decisions were not limited just to bow ties. Over time, a succession of baseball caps came and went as did baseball jackets of all types. It sometimes looked as if he had stepped out of a black-and-white picture made in the 1940s or 1950s. While this might suggest that Mike spent a good deal of time thinking about fashion and what to wear, nothing could be further from the truth in our experience. Just the opposite, he was unconcerned with external appearances, and more interested in what lay underneath. This was also evident in his professional life. It didn't matter if you were an established or beginning scholar; Mike wanted to know what you were passionate about and what you were doing now and planned to do latter.

As in his personal life, some of Michael's professional positions were not fashionable at the time. Two previously mentioned examples include his challenges of whole language and the No Child Left Behind act. Another important example includes his decision as an editor to make the *Journal of Educational Psychology* more open to different kinds of research methodology, including qualitative methods. While most educational

psychologists of the time were quantitative researchers, Mike was farsighted enough to see that the journal and the field needed to embrace and apply a more diverse set of methodologies.

Even though it earned him some enmity, he willingly played the role of “devil’s advocate.” If an academic discussion focused on the need to do more to help children in inner city schools, Mike would invariably argue for the need to consider poor children in rural communities. He was not shy in challenging an opinion or offering his own, whether it was fashionable or not.

3.6. Generous

Mike loved to collect things. His collections included polished rock eggs, teas, baseball memorabilia, old Bibles, crosses, and books. One of the wonderful things that his wife, Donna, did after Mike died was to ask people to take a cross from his collection. Many people wore these crosses to the funeral. Perhaps more importantly, this gift was in keeping with Mike, as he was a very generous person.

The story of the crosses works at two levels: it captures both his generosity and his passion as a collector. Mike loved to collect not only things, but also people. It was a good thing to be collected by Mike. He was very generous with his time, as he was always willing to talk with you about your work and how to make it better. He was also generous with his support. He took many young scholars under his wing, introducing them to other researchers as well as providing them with opportunities to publish their work in the many books and special issues of journals he edited. Mike further promoted their work by constantly telling others about it.

Mike’s generosity and support reached its pinnacle with his doctoral students. He treated them like family. They were constantly at his house and he thought of them often. When we asked Mike’s close friend, Chris Jennison, what he remembered most about Mike, he responded: “Mike and I roomed together at NRC [National Reading Conference] meetings for ten years, and every year, even when he wasn’t feeling well, he would stay up late, long past my bedtime, meeting with students, critiquing their work, encouraging their plans, and supporting their employment candidacies. He exemplified the ideal qualities of a mentor.”

4. Scholarly highlights

In examining the interplay between Mike as a person and a professional, we have not acknowledged fully all of his most important scholarly contributions. We rectify that shortcoming here. Our selection is surely idiosyncratic and reflects our own interests and biases. It does, however, provide a sense of Michael’s reach as a scholar. These accomplishments included:

- Evaluating the effectiveness of mental imagery (Pressley, 1976, 1977), the keyword method (Levin, Pressley, McCormick, Miller, & Shriberg, 1979; Pressley, Levin, & Delaney, 1982), verbal elaboration (Pressley, McDaniel, Turnure, Wood, & Ahmad, 1987), and pictures (Miller & Pressley, 1987) as tools for remembering information
- Exploring the role of metacognition in strategy use (Pressley, Levin, & Ghatala, 1984)

- Developing the good strategy user model (Pressley, 1986)
- Applying methodological analysis (i.e., the evaluation of internal and external validity criteria) to determine the overall quality of a body of intervention research (Almasi, Palmer, Gambrell, & Pressley, 1994; Lysynchuk, Pressley, D'Ailly, Smith, & Cake, 1989)
- Analyzing the effects of whole language (Pressley, 1994; Pressley & Rankin, 1994; Symons, Woloshyn, & Pressley, 1994)
- Developing guidelines for using verbal protocol analysis as a tool for studying reading (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995)
- Championing the concept of teaching multiple interrelated comprehension strategies instead of single strategies (Brown et al., 1996; Pressley, Schuder, SAIL Faculty & Administration, Bergman, & El-Dinary, 1992)
- Observing exemplary literacy teachers to identify effective practices for teaching reading and writing (Pressley et al., 2001; Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996)
- Studying and identifying effective strategies for motivating young students (Bogner et al., 2002; Pressley et al., 2003).
- Observing highly effective schools in order to develop a theory of effective instruction (Pressley, Raphael, Gallagher, & DiBella, 2004)
- Challenging the federal governments vision of scientifically based reading instruction (Pressley et al., 2004)
- Promoting the use of multiple research methodologies by educational psychologists (Pressley, 2000; Pressley et al., 2006)

Not included in our scholarly highlights are practitioner-orientated books, special issues of journals, and articles. These include, but are not limited to, teaching cognitive strategies (Pressley, 1990), effective reading instruction (Block & Pressley, 2002; Gambrell, Morrow, Neuman, & Pressley, 1999), and the concept of balanced instruction (McIntyre & Pressley, 1996; Pressley, 1998).

5. Summation

Mike is a friend and colleague who cannot be replaced. As we hope this essay demonstrates, the impact of this loss extends beyond family and friends. Mike was a tireless supporter of education. He championed the rights of all children to a quality education, made seminal contributions in research and practice, nurtured the development of a host of beginning teachers and young scholars (many of whom have gone on to be influential academics), and kept the educational establishment on its toes by pushing the envelope and challenging the status quo. His life is a testament to a piece of wisdom he often shared: "It only takes one." While his work and spirit live on in those he influenced and inspired, there is no substitution for the real thing.

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