

TC Spotlight — Dr. John Fanselow

A pioneer in TESOL and TC Tokyo's Founding Father

John Fanselow
(Ph.D. 1971)
Professor Emeritus

Books:

- *Breaking Rules*
- *Contrasting Conversations*
- *Try the Opposite*

Current jobs:

Teacher in the MA Program at Kanda; teacher for live online course in the MA Program at The New School in New York; teacher of live online courses for a start up group called The International Teacher development Institute—iTDi.

Advice:

"Enjoy your life as a teacher and as a person. If you are not happy teaching look for another profession. If you are not happy in your life, consider changing what you do in your life."

Describe your path since leaving TC New York. I retired from TC NY in 1996. The Dean asked me to continue to direct the TC MA in Tokyo and teach in it while searching for a new director. Otherwise, we would not have had a director. She said it was important to have continuity and to have a smooth transition. A month before we appointed Dr. Terry Royce as director of the MA Tokyo program, I was invited by the CEO of a tertiary institution in NZ to be acting president for six months. I had been a consultant to the institution for more than 10 years. The original plan was to have me write a job description for the position and head a search committee for a president. But then the Chairman of the Board and the CEO of the institution invited me to be the permanent rather than acting president. I was president for eight very, very exciting years. Though I had taught secondary school in a suburb of Chicago for one year, all of my teaching experience had been with graduate students. Interacting with undergraduates was very stimulating. My major roles were to raise the profile of the college, recruit students and be responsible for faculty development. I travelled to Indonesia, Malaysia, China, Taiwan, Thailand, the US and Japan to recruit students and to meet with parents of current students. We encouraged students to become involved in the community, Palmerston North (population 70,000) so I thought I should become involved as well. I joined one of the Rotary Clubs in town. Rotary International has regulations about membership. A club cannot have more than two members from the same profession or occupation. In New York I have had only two friends who are not former colleagues or students, my tax accountant and my eye doctor. Both of them live in the same apartment we do. But in Rotary I developed friendships with farmers, insurance agents, factory owners, people who raised sheep and cattle, owners of retail stores, doctors, etc. So when I say I had 8 very, very exciting years in NZ you can see why. It was an ideal retirement job! When I returned to Japan, I was invited to teach in a new MA Program in TESOL at Akita University. I taught 3 courses per year for five years. I also taught one course each August in an MA Program at The New School in New York.

What is your favorite thing about living in Tokyo? I live in Naruse on the JR Yokohama line. Everything is very convenient. Our apartment is 150 steps to the JR line. Our eye doctor and General Practitioner are in the building next door. Our dentist is 300 steps from our apartment. Two supermarkets are 200 steps away. A walking path next to a river – Ondagawa – is 5 minutes away and a mini park is 3 minutes away. I have become a member of Central Sports so I can swim and walk in the water. The pool is 3 minutes away. When I go to New York I find it very chaotic after my relaxed and friendly experiences in Naruse.

What is a favorite memory from TC?

I am afraid that this is very difficult to answer. I had many, many favorite memories. A highlight was co-teaching with Louis Bloom who was one of the leading people in the area of language acquisition and with Ray McDermott – an anthropologist who is renown in the field of education. Initiating Summer Institutes with TESOL International at TC in New York and with the University of London and ESADE in Barcelona were very stimulating. But teaching teachers and advising doctoral students was also very stimulating.

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What is your favorite thing about your current job? *My favorite thing is that I can introduce teachers to different perspectives.*

What is your advice for somebody who is trying to get into your field? *If you want to enter the field of TESOL, try teaching even as a volunteer to see to what extent you feel comfortable teaching just a few students. If you are not comfortable, then stop. If your goal is to help people then you have to ask yourself how trying to help people might not be positive. To tap the curiosity, to ask what you can learn from your students are better ways to gauge your interest in teaching.*

What motivates you? *Since I observed the intense curiosity of primary school students in Nigeria and the open attitudes of teachers I taught there, I have wanted to try to enable teachers to move beyond the absurd guidelines of Ministries of Education and the negative effects of standardized tests by observing what they do and what the effects are. If I can get one teacher to move beyond the types of teaching that degrade students and makes teachers feel frustrated following the textbook and ignoring student needs, I am thrilled.*

What is the secret to your success? *It is hard to say what success is but I have always done what I found satisfying. I did not feel any constraints. In 2005, I was awarded the Teachers College Distinguished Alumni Award. There are about 80,000 TC graduates and each year the DAA is given to 3 or so graduates. In the citation, this is what the TC President wrote:*

John F. Fanselow

The 2005 Teachers College Distinguished Alumni Award Citation



John trying to be serious

John Fanselow, your passion for teaching English as a second language was shaped by your early experience at a teacher training school in Nigeria, where you taught students who grew up without paper or pencils in their home. You have written that these students had a thirst for learning that was “more intense by ten” than your own up until that point.

You have returned the intensity of these students and paid homage to the hopes through your own pioneering achievements in the world of Teaching English to Speakers of Other languages, or TESOL. You not only directed the graduate program in TESOL at Columbia University, Teachers College but also established the first off-campus graduate program of Columbia University, Teachers College in Tokyo, splitting your teaching time between New York and Tokyo for a decade.

Your passion led you to teach at TESOL summer institutes at UCLA, the University of Oregon, San Francisco State, Georgetown, and ESADE Barcelona. You exchanged ideas and insights with a wide range of teachers from around the world, strengthening and refining the vision you forged in Nigeria. Over the years, you have shared your educational expertise with educators in Tokyo, Somalia, Greece, Turkey, Japan and Mexico, to name just a few.

Your three books—*Breaking Rules*, *Contrasting Conversations* and *Try to Opposite*—are classics in the field. Your article “Let’s see,” written for the TESOL Quarterly, won the Malkemes Prize of the American Language Program at New York University for the best article of the year relating ideas to practice. In 1997, you became Professor Emeritus at Teachers College and were then named President of International Pacific College in Palmerston North, New Zealand.

You have served as president of both TESOL International and the New York State TESOL affiliate, which presented you with its Outstanding Service Award. In the January/February 1999 issue of *TESOL Magazine*, you were named one of 30 American ESL pioneers.

You are married to Columbia University, Teachers College Alumna Dr. Kumiko Fujimura-Fanselow, Ph. D. and MA.

When you became Professor Emeritus at Columbia University, Teachers College in 1997, your students established a scholarship fund in your name to encourage “Fanslovian” ideas and practices among candidates for MA degrees in TESOL at Columbia University, Teachers College in New York and at the off-campus program you established in Tokyo.

John Fanselow, we are honored to honor your Fanslovian passion and career with this Distinguished Alumni Award.

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What student or coworker from TC has had a lasting effect on you? *A tough question. Most of my doctoral students have written books since they graduated. This was very gratifying. Though Leslie Beebe was the biggest cheerleader for the TC MA in Tokyo and we produced a book together published by SIMUL about rules in classrooms and sociolinguistic rules, her interests and mine were distinct. This was very, very fruitful for our students since they got two distinctive but complimentary perspectives. But my major co-workers were from very different departments because I saw so many different perspectives outside the fields that Leslie and I were in.*

What advice do you have for others starting at TC now? *Be open to possibilities! Do not set goals. Question everything you read and professors tell you.*

What message would you like to share with the TC community? *Enjoy your life as a teacher and as a person. If you are not happy teaching look for another profession. If you are not happy in your life, consider changing what you do in your life. In 1975, I was selected as the Second Vice President of TESOL, which means I was the program chair for TESOL 1976 in New York City. Later, I was selected President of the NYS affiliate of TESOL and later the President of TESOL International. So as I said, enjoy your life as a teacher but also participate in professional organizations. Many of my closest friends are from my involvement in TESOL International.*

Thank you, professor!

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