



## Tribute to Tom Burns, 1959–2024

When in October 2024 the world of learning lost its big champion, changemaker, and a vibrant soul – Tom Burns – we reached out to those closest to him to collaborate on a tribute that would attempt to somehow lessen the impact of the colossal gaping hole felt across the community upon hearing the sad news of Tom’s passing. The four long term colleagues, friends, and fellow travellers who wrote the pieces below did their best to create a collective and multidimensional picture of what Tom and his work represents to many of us in higher education. First sending their individual reflections and then building on each other’s and with each other through caring exchanges, this tribute evolved with its writers. Various threads were pulled and added, with collective memories shifting and reshaping while we as editors responded with poetic interventions that aimed to capture the uniqueness of Tom’s spirit, his creative contributions to knowledge, and his inspiring ways of working with and understanding students. Our four contributors’ recollections are thus spliced with poetic texts derived from their own texts, in an attempt to resist the normative assumptions around what a respectable tribute should be and how we should relate to and celebrate each other in academic spaces. Engaging with the format differently felt like the most fitting tribute to a person who not only took pride in being different but who also instilled this pride in others, one who was larger than life and for whom formulas and tired conventions were merely invitations to finding more liberated forms of learning.

Will you join us?

This space is Tom’s.

**Dr John Hilsdon**  
**Former Head of Learning Support and Wellbeing, University of Plymouth, UK**

Remembering Tom,  
like  
many others,  
the first  
thing I recall  
is  
his voice  
– and then  
his smile.

In spite of the progressive varieties of enlightenment thinking which have influenced the establishment and practices of our universities, historically they have remained elite institutions, inaccessible to the great majority of the population. Tom Burns' demotic and insightful voice was powerful, sounding from the world beyond the elites, but offering up a mirror to his institutions. Tom did not just knock on the door of higher education, he made his way in, made himself at home, and (working alongside his beloved partner, Sandra Sinfield), invited many others to join him there. He and Sandra did this in their teaching, in their writing and in their collaborative initiatives with other educators and Learning Developers across the UK and beyond.

Tom and Sandra's approach – it is hard to separate the two – in work with colleagues, was always to draw attention to the experiences of students, to promote their interests in being full members of their various higher education communities. For Tom it was a given that education should be for all with the desire to participate. His pluralistic approach was expressed in practice through innovative and creative teaching and learning experiences, exemplified in the 'Becoming an Educationalist' module he developed at London Metropolitan University. In this, students were encouraged to represent their experiences in whatever way helped them to deepen their understanding or express questions about their studies. Film, music, poetry, dance and collage are just some forms that he and Sandra encouraged as media for learning. The module was accompanied by a blog 'Becoming Educational'. Out of this, a staff-facing module, 'Facilitating Student Learning',

was developed, in which the same playful, immersive and active learning strategies were used, so that staff could explore their own theories through a creative lens to make their own practice more joyful.

We may not see Tom anymore, but his unique contributions to our field will live on – evoking voices and smiles – especially through the publications for students and staff, for which he and Sandra are deservedly well-known and respected.

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**Prof. Debbie Holley**  
**Professor of Learning Innovation, Bournemouth University, UK**

Tom Burns was a passionate academic who spent over three decades fighting for and championing students and making their voices heard across the academy at a local, national and international level.

Tom had an exceptional publication record and wrote and edited with his lifetime partner Sandra Sinfield. Their joint work included the best-selling Essential Study Skills series, journal articles and blog posts. I first met Tom Burns when I was leading a Master's Programme at the London Metropolitan University Business School (LMBS). At that time,

international students were struggling with academic writing, criticality and finding their 'voice'. Tom worked with me to deliver classroom-based interventions that transformed their experiences of writing and built their confidence in independent study. He also directly influenced my work, mentoring me in my academic writing, since I had joined from industry and had no academic writing experience. Tom was a generous and thought-provoking mentor, and in further collaborations his theoretical framing and input was inspiring – he was one of the most well-read colleagues I have ever worked with. Over time, we enjoyed collaborating on a wide range of projects, and he and Sandra became close friends.

Tom's influence on academia involved insightful theorising of creative pedagogies. His work fed into different iterations of the PGCert. In his writing, programme design and teaching he drove forward a social justice agenda. His work has rightly been included in the most recent, as well as former REF exercises, including an Impact Case study of Widening Participation in the Education submission. Tom's legacy is wide-reaching. He led the way in showing how we can all – the student community, academic staff, learning developers, technologists, artists and beyond – come together to reframe learning as spaces of agency and power.

I close with a quote from a piece we wrote together in 2004 (Sinfield, Burns, and Holley):

Many of us acknowledge that the success of much of our teaching is due to the diversity of our student body and the high levels of motivation, commitment and enthusiasm that the students themselves bring to the university. At the same time, it is an opportune moment to examine our own practices, rather than problematising the practices of our students. We do need to make transparent the forms and processes of academic discourse and work to facilitate student negotiation of the potentially hostile environment that is Academia.

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**Dr Sandra Abegglen**  
**Researcher, University of Calgary, Canada**

As Tom would always greet us with his trademark warmth and optimism: 'Hello lovely people'.

It's hard to grasp that Tom Burns is no longer with us. Tom was a remarkable academic, a brilliant teaching professor, a fierce advocate for students, a soulful poet, and an incredible cook. He was also a treasured friend and collaborator who, alongside his life and professional partner Sandra Sinfield, touched countless lives, including mine.

Tom and Sandra were my colleagues and teachers at London Metropolitan University before I became their co-researcher and co-writer. Our first piece together, published over a decade ago in the university's *Investigations in University Teaching and Learning* journal, explored mentoring, becoming, and creative academic practice. These themes became the foundation of our work and our enduring friendship. For me, they were more than colleagues; they were my support system and source of inspiration. Even after moving to Canada, I spoke with them weekly, sharing life's joys and struggles.

Tom, together with Sandra (the two are, as John Hilsdon states, hard to separate), was a guiding light in the world of learning development. Together, they created spaces where students and colleagues alike felt seen, heard, and inspired. Their ability to foster

community and a sense of belonging was unmatched. They always had an open door, a listening ear, and a willingness to engage.

Their contributions to learning development are vast and enduring. As co-founders of the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE), they championed pedagogical collaboration and innovation. They launched the #Take5 blog, which has become a treasure trove of teaching and learning insights, with over 100 blog contributions from educators and students worldwide. Their student-facing Study Hub and the *Essential Study Skills* series, now in its fifth edition, have profoundly impacted countless learners and teachers.

But beyond these accomplishments, Tom profoundly shaped individuals' careers and lives. He walked alongside people, helping them grow, reflect, and find their voices in the classroom. He celebrated others' successes as if they were his own, amplifying perspectives and achievements, and making others feel valued and heard. Widening participation at its best.

Tom Burns was one of a kind: compassionate, generous, endlessly curious, and fiercely committed to education as a positive transformative force. He inspired me to think creatively, act collaboratively, and always keep students at the heart of what I do.

Tom Burns – much beloved, deeply missed, and forever in my heart.

'Hello lovely people'  
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**Prof. Digby Warren**  
**Emeritus Professor of Higher Education, London Metropolitan University, UK**

Associate Professor Tom Burns, a vibrant, visionary and inspiring educator and an astute, prolific scholar, has fashioned and bequeaths a dynamic and transformative legacy, arising from his generative working with his regular co-authors, Associate Professor Sandra Sinfield (his professional and personal partner) and Dr Sandra Abegglen, and numerous others – students, Learning Development (LD) and Educational Development (ED) practitioners, new lecturers, experienced academics – who have engaged with them in collaborative inquiry and innovative practice, focused around empowering learners and teachers in higher education (HE).

Driven by the quest to develop participatory and inclusive practices that foster the whole person and build self-efficacy in students, through his collaborative LD/ED work and action research, his enthusiasm and his potent legacy Tom has advanced artful and playful pedagogies that offer students, and teachers too, the room and freedom to experiment, to question and actively to pursue their learning and development. Concomitantly, in the contemporary context of ‘digitalism’ and the stultifying marketisation of HE, he has helped to facilitate a reparative re-imagining of HE, where universities are conceived and constructed as open, accessible, creative and humane spaces ‘full of trust, care and laughter’, and sustained by ‘hope and positivity’ (Abegglen et al., 2023).

Tom’s impact is widespread and lasting, touching thousands of learners, educators, developers and leaders in HE inspired by his work and by him personally. It has been achieved by his energetic and imaginative contributions on multiple fronts: workshops and courses for students and staff, online resources and communities, professional mentoring, networks and associations, collaborative writing, national and international projects and conferences, essential textbooks and extensive publications. Infusing all is the amazing person who has illuminated us in so many ways: through his welcoming warmth and

uplifting humour; his compassionate kindness and unstinting generosity; his brilliant mind bursting with insights and novel ideas fed by his impressive range of experience, reading and knowledge; his vivid creativity and dedicated support; and his deep passion for justice - all drawing on his proud working-class heritage of 'active and creative' community and political involvement (see Social Science Space, 2024). Like his immediate collaborators, Tom Burns has epitomised, lived and breathed education for social justice, as an early advocate and practitioner of liberating, inclusive and creative teaching and learning. May his rich legacy continue to illuminate and inspire all who are dedicated to education as the practice of freedom and hope.

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Tom was a great friend and champion of the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*. Upon every release of a new *JLDHE* issue, an email pinged with a big ‘Congratulations!’ message or a ‘party popper’ emoji from him, reminding us that amongst the hard work and accomplishment we should always make space for joy. That joy – play – light – humour – curiosity – community – care ethic Tom had about him comes across clearly through everyone who speaks about him, from formal institutional biographies and publications to personal memory sites and casual conversations.

On the [Learning Development Project](#) podcast in 2022, a conversation filled with his signature joy and laughter, Tom thus explained his life’s journey:

By the time I was 22  
I picked up  
four trades  
in the building game.  
I learnt  
how to watch  
how to ask  
how to do  
how to teach one.  
I should have been a surgeon,  
really.  
But that’s another life.

We have no doubt that Tom’s energy – deliberate, healing, transformative – will continue to live on amongst us, in those he taught and impacted, challenged and inspired, wrote for and alongside, like a surgeon mending (and melting) our hearts and minds so we continue hoping for a better university.

As we hold Tom dear in our hearts, we know that he held us dear in his heart too – a truth most poignantly expressed by his beloved life partner, wife, and collaborator, Sandra Sinfield, with whose moving words shared at Tom’s ‘Last Dance’ we want to close this tribute.

### My Tommy

We are all here because Tom Burns loved us. He loved his friends and family – his colleagues and his students. Thomas William Burns was kind and generous – he always wanted the best for you – he helped people be their best selves. Tommy’s love was infinite

Tommy was also the bravest person I know – in being a working class academic who kept his East End accent – his humanity, generosity and communality. Who married me! And in the way he faced the worst news we ever got just two months after our wedding.

Tommy and I found each other – we worked together – wrote together – and taught together. Together we discovered that love matters. It’s a fundamental principle – in education – and in life.

We all know this. But so many people put love in a box - for special occasions – but with Tommy – he was brave enough to live it – to show it – to offer it. Tommy’s love was infinite.

I’m so happy he loved me – and you – and I’m so very sad he has left us:

He was my north, my south, my east, my west  
My working week and my Sunday rest.  
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;  
I thought that he would last forever: I was wrong.

(Auden, 1938)

## References

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