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## Diane Larsen-Freeman: Seven Personal Vignettes of the Person and the Scholar

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### Abstract

This personal account narrates seven instances in which the author encountered Diane Larsen-Freeman as a person and scholar, and how those two identities are integrated in her work. As in many scholarly lives, these meetings were virtual (through the medium of print), vicarious (observations from a distance during conferences and summer institutes), and face-to-face. The common thread running through all these experiences has been Diane's generosity, wisdom, and positive power as a human being, and how her scholarship has been permeated by that humanity.

**Keywords:** *Diane Larsen-Freeman, Second Language Acquisition, Language Teaching*

### 1. Hawai'i

Every aspiring academic has experienced that magic moment when they actually *meet* the scholar whose work they deeply admire. That moment *almost* came for me at the 1986 TESOL Summer Institute at the University of Hawai'i Manoa. I say "almost" because, during those six glorious weeks of courses, talks, and seminars by the stars of applied linguistics, I never actually met Diane. Instead, this shy and insecure master's student observed her from a distance, although we were in the same dining room and common spaces on a daily basis.

Even then--and even from a distance--Diane was obviously a star, always at the center of an excited group of students and peers. And even from a distance I could feel her intelligence, warmth, generosity, and engagement with those around her. I had eagerly read her seminal 1976 article, banged my head on the *Grammar Book* (Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia, 1983), dove happily into *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching* (1986--the thin green-cover 1st edition), but seeing Diane there, in the flesh, interacting with people around her, I formed a lasting impression of her as a human being.

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## **2. Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991)**

My second meeting with Diane was again indirect--this time through reading Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991). I realize that "meeting" someone in print may sound odd, but it's actually quite close to what we do today, when we live so much of "In Real Life" on the internet. Print is another high-tech mediation device, and scholars have been meeting through it for a very long time. In any case, I devoured Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) cover to cover, soaking up the explanations and reveling in the crystal-clear prose. It's still one of the best accounts of SLA studies I know of, and, like many other fans, I waited eagerly for a second edition. But works of art aren't reproduced that easily, except perhaps on copy machines. It isn't hard to imagine how many times Larsen-Freeman and Long got copied, shared, then copied and shared again.

## **3. Larsen-Freeman (1997)**

My third meeting with Diane was again indirect, and again in print. I began my doctoral studies as a confirmed SLA cognivist, but under the influence of two very persuasive non-SLA scholars (Elinor Ochs and James Paul Gee), I gave up imagining I could contribute to such a hyper-cognitive field. Diane's 1997 article was a shock--here was a leading cognitive researcher renouncing her heritage, and setting out on uncharted waters. Her approach was brave, exploratory, uncertain, starting as it did in a completely unrelated field, but written in her ultra-clear, ultra-thoughtful style. Along with a handful of other scholars, she inspired an SLA revolution, and I was thrilled to follow!

## **4. AAAL 2007 & 2009**

It was not until the early 2000s that I finally met Diane face-to-face--I find it odd that I don't remember that meeting clearly--memory is such a strange thing. But in 2007, as Eton Churchill, Takako Nishino, Hanako Okada, and I struggled to figure out how to study SLA sociocognitively, we invited Diane and Claire Kramersch to join our AAAL colloquium on the topic. It now seems audacious--inviting big fish to join little minnows in a big pond--but both Diane and Claire generously agreed. Without Diane's active participation and warm support at that critical moment it's safe to say that nothing else described below would have happened. Her sincere involvement was both energizing and reassuring for young scholars who were trying to do something different--minnows swimming against the tide: My colleagues still tell stories of how she encouraged and supported them as they took the stage. And no doubt because of Diane's and Claire's presence people actually *came* to the colloquium and seemed interested. Based on that altogether happy experience, I organized a 2009 colloquium featuring Diane and a small cast of other non-cognivist scholars: James Lantolf, Gabriele Kasper, and Leo van Lier, each of us talking about our own "alternative" approach to SLA.

## **5. Alternative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition (2011)**

The 2009 colloquium developed into an edited volume, *Alternative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition*. The contributors were Diane, James Lantolf, Lourdes Ortega, Gabriele Kasper, Johannes Wagner, Bonny Norton, Carolyn McKinney, Patsy Duff, Steven Talmy, and myself. I was nervous about editing the work of these outstanding scholars, perhaps especially because I asked them to follow a strict format. But they were patient and flexible as I edited

with all my obsessive-compulsive heart. And finally, after revising several drafts of an already-excellent paper based on my tiny micro-comments, Diane simply said, in her kind but straightforward style, "Dwight, I have to move on."

## **6. Douglas Fir Group**

In 2013, due to the generosity of James Lantolf and Xiaofei Lu, a two-day symposium on alternative approaches to SLA was held at the Pennsylvania State University. On Day 1, Diane, Jim Lantolf, Heidi Byrnes, Patsy Duff, Nick Ellis, Joan Kelly Hall, Eduardo Negueruela, Bonny Norton, Lourdes Ortega, John Schumann, Elaine Tarone, and I presented our own approaches to SLA, followed by the kind of detailed, thoughtful, and cooperative discussion that human beings at their best seem particularly good at (Goffman, 1961). Diane's involvement was crucial, as it has been in most of the events described in this paper--her remarkable ability to find the common and the good in diverse bodies of work set the tone for that event. On the second day, we met as a group with students and other scholars, and by day's end we had a strong sense of an ecumenical conceptualization of SLA. We held a follow-up colloquium at AAAL 2014, then met for two days (with Karen Johnson and Merrill Swain as new additions, and Meredith Doran as our expert amanuensis, clarifier, and synthesizer) in the Douglas Fir Room of the conference hotel. As we planned in detail our shared statement, Diane once again set the tone with her calm, focused, and highly collaborative interactional style. The resulting paper appeared in the 100th anniversary issue of the *Modern Language Journal* (MLJ) as "A transdisciplinary framework for SLA in a multilingual world," by the Douglas Fir Group (2016). This was followed up in another meeting--at AAAL 2018--and a special issue of *MLJ* devoted to the topic (Byrnes & Duff, 2019).

## **7. AAAL 23**

After a four-year break--three due to COVID--I excitedly attended the AAAL conference in March 2023. Some of the familiar faces from Diane's generation and mine were missing, and the attendees were definitely a younger crowd. But there, across the room and with a throng of excited people around her was Diane! It took me back 37 years, to when I had first seen her in Hawai'i. There Diane stood, fully engaged with her audience, once again filling the room with her warmth, wisdom, and power. This time, however, we hugged and talked.

I had co-organized a colloquium entitled "Toward Commensurability in Complexity: Diverse Approaches to SLA/T in Dialogue," yet again trying to bring together SLA scholars from diverse backgrounds and approaches. It was held on the final day of the conference, most attendees had gone home, and the rest of us were exhausted. But there in the audience was Diane: Locked in, actively questioning, and quietly cheering us on. At session's end, when the presenters gathered for a group picture, there among us was Diane!



And then in summer 2023 as my co-organizer Marije Michel and I planned how to move the colloquium toward publication, I said, "And of course we'll ask Diane to be the discussant." Marije paused for a moment, cocked her head, and replied, "Oh, I thought she already *was* part of the group--I mean she's right there in the middle of our picture!" And so Diane was, and so Diane is: Always on the scene, always engaged, always unfailingly generous with her time, support, and wisdom. And always surrounded by an excited crowd of people!

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