

Obituary: Mabel Cooper (1944 – 2013)



Mabel Cooper, who has died of cancer, aged 68, was a charismatic and inspirational figure in the changing world of learning disability. She had a tremendous ability to draw on personal experience to tell stories that, written or spoken, engaged and inspired her readers and listeners in many walks of life.

Born in 1944, Mabel had the misfortune to be separated from her family in infancy and to spend her childhood in a succession of children's homes. Eventually, aged 13, she acquired the label of 'learning disability' which led to her being admitted to St Lawrence's Hospital (a long-stay institution) in Caterham, Surrey where she remained for the next 20 years. Mabel left hospital in 1977 to live in the community, and in the 1980s she joined Croydon People First self-advocacy group, where she became the chairperson. In that role, and in her subsequent role as chair of London People First, she worked with people with learning disabilities to enable them to speak for themselves.

In the 1990s, aware of the sweeping changes in learning disability policy and practice, Mabel began telling her story. Published to much acclaim in a book called *Forgotten Lives* (1997), her story proved an inspiration to people with and without learning disabilities, in this country and beyond. Her story covered the major changes of recent decades, from institutional to community care and the growth of the self-advocacy movement. Her capacity to recount and reflect on her own experience, and to set this within a wider social context, brought new insights into life in institutions and revealed the otherwise hidden conflict between personal and official accounts.

Mabel's capacity to recount and reflect meant she held many audiences spellbound at national and international conferences, notably at the SHLD's annual conferences at the OU in Milton Keynes, but also on major platforms in London, Scotland and Melbourne, Australia. Her facility with words, and her ability to use personal experience to shed light on historical events, led to her becoming a published author who contributed to several SHLD books. As well as *Forgotten Lives*, she also contributed directly to *Crossing Boundaries* (2000), *Good Times, Bad Times* (2000) and *Exploring Experiences of Advocacy* (2006). Mabel's descriptions and observations of her own life and the lives of others, so vivid, poignant and revealing, made her eminently quotable in books and papers by writers and researchers around the world. In acknowledgement of the universality of her contribution to our understanding of the history of learning disability Mabel was invited to visit Australia and to speak at conferences held in Melbourne in 2008.

More than anyone at the time, Mabel recognised the importance of recording personal stories so that social history was never forgotten. This had particular resonance for people with learning disabilities, who had also spent many years living in institutional care and whose lives had gone largely unrecorded. But by researching her own circumstances, by recording her autobiography and by her willingness to talk about it, Mabel also inspired many other people – including students, researchers, academics, professionals and staff – with insights into life in institutions and the conflict that often exists between official and personal accounts of institutional life. Her publications became standard texts in many universities, including the OU, through her work with the SHLD research group. Over a number of years, Mabel contributed in various ways to the professional training of nurses, social workers and teachers.

Mabel's personal testimony was put to practical use in her work with children and young people in schools. Drawing on personal experience, she was able to educate them about the lives of people with learning disabilities. She was skilled in enabling children to understand the discrimination, and the bullying, faced by people with learning disabilities and how these might be countered. She was particularly and rightly proud of her work in schools, for which she was shortlisted for a DH Good Practice Award in 2013.

In making sure her story was told, and recorded, Mabel has left an enduring legacy. For her work with the Open University in researching the history of learning disability and for her

work in the wider community she won OU and public recognition through the award of an honorary Master's degree at The Barbican in 2010. This was a very special day for Mabel, and for the audience of graduates, their families and OU academics who were privileged to hear her acceptance speech.

In so many respects, Mabel was a remarkable woman. She overcame the disadvantages of her early life, to become an advocate and spokesperson for people with learning disabilities. She used her personal experience to influence policies and practice, and made a difference to so many people's lives. Forthright and outspoken as she often was, she was also gentle, warm-hearted and generous. Having grown up outside family life, and having missed out on all the ordinary everyday experiences of childhood, Mabel somehow developed an amazing capacity to give so much of herself to others, and to touch many lives.

Mabel will be much missed by her many friends, her colleagues at the Open University and members of the various organisations in which she was involved.

Dorothy Atkinson