

The Beginnings of MERGA

Preamble to the Annual Clements/Foyster Lecture

In the middle of 1976 John Foyster, who was then based at the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), came to see me at Monash University, where I was in charge of the Mathematics Education program. John talked about how the Australian Science Education Research Association (ASERA) had recently been established, with Professor Richard Tisher (then of Monash University) as the prime mover. John wondered whether the time was ripe for a similar national group interested in *mathematics* education research to be established, and asked whether he and I might take steps to establish such a group.

My immediate reaction was yes, we should do it. Then came the doubts and reservations. How would the Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers (AATM) react to such an initiative? After all, AATM already had a “Research Committee.” In any case, would there be enough mathematics educators in Australia, interested in such a group to make it a viable proposition? Who would provide the funds likely to be needed for the establishment of such a group?

It was John’s and my opinion that the AATM Research Committee had not reached out to embrace most of the people lecturing in mathematics education in Australia at teachers colleges or in universities at the time. Intuitively, I thought Australia needed a group like the one John was proposing. My intuition told me that AATM was not the organisation to move towards the establishment of such a group.

John assured me that he would put up any funds needed to get the group going (and, hopefully, any group that was established would be able to pay him back within a few years). Hence we decided to proceed with the idea of establishing the group and to strike while the iron was hot, so to speak, by conducting a national conference at Monash University in the middle of 1977. I came up with the name “Mathematics Education Research Group of Australia” which John liked because of the acronym MERGA, which suggested a “merging together.” We sent out notices of our intention to form MERGA late in 1976. Neither of us knew many of the people who might be interested in joining such a group, so the notices were addressed to the “Mathematics Lecturers at...”

Soon after we had decided to go ahead, I heard of the existence of a group, based in New South Wales, called the Mathematics Education Lecturers’ Association (MELA). John and I talked about whether MERGA and MELA might become one from the outset, but we decided that the aims of MELA seemed to be sufficiently different from those that we envisaged for MERGA, focused far more on research than lecturing, that we should proceed with the MERGA idea.

And so it came to be that in May 1977, the first of what was to become the annual conference of MERGA took place. About 100 people attended, with papers frenetically being read from 9 am to about 10 pm, for three days, in a Rotunda Theatre at Monash University. Professor Richard Tisher was present at the start of the Conference, and talked of his experiences in establishing ASERA. Frank Lester, of Indiana University, was among those present. In the event, two volumes of papers read at the Conference were produced (the first volume being available on the first day of the Conference, and the second several months later).

At a post-Conference meeting it was decided that, yes, MERGA should be formed, that the second meeting would be at Macquarie University in May 1978, and that annual conferences should be held each year at a different academic institution. At that second conference it was decided by those present that MERGA should continue and a constitution and election of offices would be decided on at the third conference to be held at the then Brisbane College of Education. And so MERGA was born.

Ken Clements