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Hewitt: I am speaking with Dr. Henry Robertson, Professor of American Studies, as part of the USF Silver Anniversary Oral History Project. Let me begin by asking you what your first contact was with the University of South Florida and why you decided to come here?

Robertson: I think it was a very close and eminent contact, as a matter of fact, although I was far removed in terms of miles. I was at the University of Minnesota up in Minneapolis finishing up my work on my Ph.D. at the time. Dr. Russell Cooper, who was subsequently Dean of Liberal Arts here at the University of South Florida, was at that time Dean at the University of Minnesota. He introduced me to Sidney French, who was on campus. He apparently was a friend of Sidney French and Sidney French was out recruiting for faculty at that particular time for the new institution beginning in Florida. So I had the opportunity really to meet Dean French at that time. He was a man for whom I worked for after I came here. I can recall having that initial contact with Dean Sidney French back in the very early days even before I decided to come. They made things so attractive. It was a kind of program that had an immense amount of appeal for a large number of people, particularly those interested in interdisciplinary work. I didn't have to debate the question very long before I decided that that was what I wanted to do.
Hewitt: You arrived in January of 1961?

Robertson: Yes, that's right.

Hewitt: Do you remember your first impressions of the University when you arrived?

Robertson: Well, I was to have arrived really in September of 1960, but my commitments at Minnesota were such that I was unable to get away at that particular time. My earliest memories of the University of South Florida was rather like the Sahara Desert as a matter of fact. There was a lot of sand. There were only three buildings on campus at that particular time. I think the Administration building, what is now the Chemistry building, and the Student Center. The library was just under way. It was a small community, to be sure. I recall the parking lots at that time, if you drove an automobile—it was the only possible way of getting here, unless you came by camel—you had to be very cautious because sand would get into the brakes and the brake drums and when you applied your brakes, you might find, for example, that it took them some time to recatch. So you had to be cautious about that kind of thing. The kids at that time had a good phrase for it. Going across the campus from the Administration building over to Student Center was known as traveling across the desert to the oasis.

Hewitt: What was your original position at the University of South Florida? What were you hired to teach?
Robertson: As a matter of fact I came here principally as the person who was
to work in advising in the new College of Basic Studies, which as
you know, accommodated at least in those early years most of the
students who were at the University. I was to assume that
responsibility and teach additional courses in the College of
Basic Studies. I was also to teach the American Idea in that
particular department in that program. I began teaching, as a
matter of fact, my first courses in Behavioral Science largely
because I had an M.A. degree in Psychology from Minnesota. Les
Malpass, who was the chairman of the program in Behavioral Science
at that time, latched on to me and asked if I would teach this
because students who were in their freshman year were taking
behavioral science courses, whereas the American Idea was a course
set aside for the sophomore year and so as a result, well, we
didn't move into that until the following period.

Hewitt: So fortunately you came with an interdisciplinary background?

Robertson: Yes. As a matter of fact I have taught Functional English and I
have taught virtually everything else except science and
mathematics. I have taught in Humanities for a period of time.

Hewitt: All the way around the circle!

Robertson: All the way around the circle.

Hewitt: Could you tell me a little bit about the American Idea course,
what it was suppose to be, and how people went about actually
teaching it?
Robertson: As a matter of fact the American Idea course, like so many other things at that particular point in Basic Studies, was largely a matter of projection of the person, I think, who was running the program. This was in large measure a reflection of a Dr. Warner, who I mentioned a moment ago who was the first chair person in that program. He looked upon it as a kind of thing which we would attempt to teach a certain amount of American history, American political science, and briefly it was to be an interdisciplinary kind of program. There was less emphasis upon literature, poetry, and things of that kind. None the less, the paramount interest was to be historical, political science and most of the readings that were done were primarily, of course, with six or seven paperback books selected for a semester's work. The emphasis was to get a feeling for what American meant. How was it a unique kind of experience? What was exceptional about the American experience that set it apart and aside from other experiences, both national and ethnic, that people have had in the past? You brought to this kind of thing largely yourself and what you wanted to bring to it. This had an immense amount of appeal, of course, to a large number of people as you might imagine. I didn't teach full-time in the program because as I mentioned a good deal of my commitment was to the advising activity. So I can only find myself clear to teach one or two courses each term. It wasn't until later that I sprung myself free to teach on a full-time kind of basis.
Hewitt: What were your responsibilities as Academic Advisor in Basic Studies?

Robertson: I was the coordinator of the program in Basic Studies. As a result I had the responsibilities for the academic advising of all students who were enrolled in that particular college. What I attempted to do, I don't think it was a novel idea in any sense, but at least in... Well, I won't say that it is not a novel idea. I think perhaps it is at least in some respects. We chose people from various areas, departments, and programs within the University to work as an advisor, and they were given release teaching time for that particular purpose. I remember we had Jack Fernandez, for example, from Chemistry. We had Glen Wolfenden from Biological Sciences. We had Sue Saxon from over in Behavioral Sciences. We had a variety of people who were working in particular areas and were willing to devote part of their time to advising students at the beginning level. So I had this core of people. We had staff meetings regularly, and we had programs trying to keep people abreast of what was going on. One of my responsibilities was writing an advising manual so people would have that available to them. I answered most of their questions. As I said, we had regular meetings to keep up with what was going on. This system worked out reasonably well because it gave students the advantage of having a person who was knowledgeable about the field toward which they were headed. There were also people who had volunteered their services, which meant that they had more than a passing kind of interest in the advising function in the advising role.
Hewitt: And they actually got release time to do this?

Robertson: They got release time to do it.

Hewitt: They had some training in it?

Robertson: As a matter of fact, believe it or not, it's very hard to believe in these days, advising efficiency records were taken into account when it came time for promotion.

Hewitt: Really? You're right. That is hard to imagine now. As part of your job as coordinating this kind of program, did you have much contact with the community in terms of recruiting students into the program?

Robertson: Well, recruiting students in what sense? Do you mean bringing new students into the University?

Hewitt: Right. And letting people know that a program does exist.

Robertson: Oh yes. This certainly accounts for the visits that I mentioned a moment ago that I took with Dr. Spain when he was Registrar at that particular time at the University. Many times I would accompany him or members of his staff or other representatives from the various colleges within the University, and there some three of four at that particular time, to institutions and occasionally to high schools, as a matter of fact. We even visited high schools to talk with prospective students and talk about the University and the kind of program which we had
available here at USF. Frankly, I think that we induced a number of people to come. I really do.

Hewitt: Were people at the junior college level very aware that a new University existed in south Florida?

Robertson: Not as much as you might imagine they would be. You should think . . . Of course we were so impressed with the fact that we had begun a new institution. Something new under the sun. The first land grant institution in the twentieth century and all that kind of thing. But we thought, of course, that it must be internationally known. We were certainly amazed to find that many times students were unaware of the fact that we existed so we had to point out that not only did we exist, but we had a fine program for them. We wanted to lure them to our doorstep if we possibly could. I think that among the people I worked with as recruiters in that particular sense, why, we did a reasonably good job in those early days of bringing people to a new university. The accent on knowledge and the accent on learning was something that was paramount. This was the thing that we seemed to recruit, at least, our share of shall we say, the better students. We did a good job of doing that.

Hewitt: The "Accent on Learning" is still the motto of the University of South Florida. Could you tell me a little bit about what that meant to people in those early years? Of course, twenty-five years later, everyone knows the motto, but you don't think much about it anymore.
Robertson: I think at that particular time there was a good deal of sentiment among a large number of people anyway that many of the southern institutions were country clubs and that there was not too much in the way of real academic powers that one had to exert in order to get along in that kind of environment. We wanted to overcome that. We had the feeling that what we were doing here in the area of general education and interdisciplinary work of one kind of another was something unique. We did feel that the emphasis and the accent was on knowledge and on learning. As a result we bent every effort towards that end and towards proving that particular point. I think whether it is true or false, many people did have the impression that... Not only, of course, outside south view but within the south, there was that kind of attitude toward some institutions that existed. Florida had a big football team and Florida had all kinds of social activities such as that.

Hewitt: One of the committees that you worked on was the Academic Standards Committee in those early years. How did the functions of the Academic Standards Committee reflect the "Accent on Learning" in its attempt to demonstrate that USF was going to be a different kind of southern university?

Robertson: I think the Academic Standards Committee really handled a tremendously large load of work in terms of what I mentioned before, people who had been dropped out for poor work, people who were on academic warning, things of that kind, who were interested in returning to the University after a period of time, people who wanted exceptions to various rules and regulations that governed
their behavior and so on. So it was a monumental kind of work load to carry. I have a feeling that there was more care about readmitting students, for example, who had been placed on academic warning. We had a number of students, for example, who had been to institutions early on who had come here to the University of South Florida and decided, for example, that this was an institution, for example, where it was a kind of setting where you could come and get what you were after. Mainly the accent was indeed on learning. This was something that the Academic Standards Committee tried to put into practice by weeding out the kind of people who somehow didn't take this seriously. We were not adamant on that particular point. We readmitted people periodically when it seemed that they had sufficiently good reason. We made alot of exceptions to the rule. That's what the committee was for. And certainly, we proceeded to do that. I think that a good academic regulations committee or standards committee, as it was called at that time, is really essential to the academic fiber of any kind of institution. We've got to perceive that these things are maintained, and if you don't you are in bad shape.

Hewitt: It sounds like you were very busy during those early days.

Robertson: We were terribly busy. As I said, there were occasions on which we actually worked during the Christmas holiday period. I can recall instances where in all these sessions we would have people, for personal appointments, would come in to explain their case to make their points personally before the committee. We had to
obviously allot a specific period of time; we would often be there for a full day on hearings of that particular kind. Particularly just before the new term. So it was an extremely busy committee.

Hewitt: Now you clearly worked very closely with both administrators and faculty both in the advising area and the academic standards, could you describe what relations were like between faculty and administration in those early days?

Robertson: In a word I would say relaxed. This was a period of time, I can recall, going across campus, for example, over to the student center for lunch and sitting down at the table and being joined by the president.

Hewitt: That's not likely to happen now.

Robertson: Not likely! Not that our president has anything against behaving in that particular fashion, but because we have become so large. Certainly when you become large, obviously there is a certain amount of distance. This is essentially what has happened over a period of time. I can recall having access to people like the business manager, for example, just going up and rapping on the door and go in and say, "Look, we're in bad shape here and our core of advisors need some additional assistance of some kind." Being a good business manager he would of course fight, but nonetheless many times I could get him to relent and we could get a few extra dollars for something that we desperately needed. So it was that kind of relationship. Everyone had an open door.

This was no less true for John Allen, the first president of the
University, who was certainly very much that way. He was an easy man to talk with. It was true for virtually everyone associated with the University at that particular time. I cannot remember any instance of being in awe of someone who had administrative authority.

Hewitt: When it came to actually making decisions or creating policies, did this friendlier atmosphere actually give faculty more responsibility or more input into decision making?

Robertson: There was a Policy Planning Committee which I had served on for a brief period of time. Back in the early days of the University, there was a Policy Planning Committee and it was made up of people, both administrators and faculty members, who would get together and do long range planning policy and so on for the University as a whole. This was largely a give and take thing, and I would say it was relatively a democratic kind of procedure that you didn't find the feeling, for example, that the administrative decisions were necessarily the final answers. They would carry weight, to be sure, but nonetheless faculty opinion had weight too. So I didn't have the feeling, for example, that faculty was intimidated at all at that particular time during the early days. I do know that it all depends upon one's personal experience. There were some faculty members, I'm sure, during the days of President John Allen who felt that he was rather arbitrary about certain things and that he conducted all the so called faculty senate meetings personally, which he did. There is no question about that. I can remember them very vividly. I don't
thing this kind of thing interfered with the long range operation of the institution itself. I have a feeling that at least as a low man on the totem pole that my input carried some weight. Frankly, I'm not sure it does anymore.

Hewitt: How would describe relationships between faculty and students in those early days? Was there a more accessible relationship there also?

Robertson: Yes, I think there was a great deal more camaraderie in those days. I don't know whether that is nostalgia getting at me or what. I have that particular feeling that there was a great deal more warm kind of relationship between faculty and students in the early days of the University than there appears to be at present time. Once again, I don't know whether it is a function of size or role that we have assumed at this particular development in the institution, or exactly what it is or whether faculty members somehow feel compelled at the present time to devote most of their resources, talents, and their energies to research. As a result students are interrupting-their-day-kind of attitude sets in, and I think, quite frankly, is unfortunately true of some people. You didn't find so much of that. There was a close relationship between students and faculty in those early days because part of the philosophy of the University was essentially on that particular point. The relationship between student and faculty was an extremely important thing. Teaching was A-1 priority. Research certainly was important. I don't mean to deny that for a moment. It certainly was, but it was not A-1.
Hewitt: When did that kind of emphasis shift to the emphasis we have now where research does seem to be A-1?

Robertson: I think with the disappearance of the College of Basic Studies around 1970, after the first decade. There was a certain erosion of that kind of thing that took place during the period of time in the latter part of the '60s, but with the departure of President Allen and the disappearance of the College of Basic Studies marked the end of that kind of thing.

Hewitt: Do you think there were forces other than simply President Allen's retirement that helped to push the University in a new direction?

Robertson: I think sheer force of numbers for one thing. I have the feeling, for example, that we began to realize, just in terms of our relationship with reality, namely the legislature and the Board of Regents. We had to conform to a particular standard and that standard was very much like the other state universities. Not only our state university, but state universities all over the entire nation. We had to be like them. This is what we have become. I think those are the pressures that have devolved upon us in that particular period, had been really applied from above. As a result, we've had no way of escaping it. We have become, in effect, another large state university behaving essentially the same way. Originally, in the beginning days of the University, we all had that beautiful dream, that we were something unique and something different.
Hewitt: Do you think that that shift, for people who were here in those early days, was it a difficult transition to go from feeling like you were a part of a unique experiment to feeling you had gradually become part of a standard state university?

Robertson: I think it varied with the individual. I think some people seem to have adjusted to it reasonably well. I know many of my colleagues, for example, who are charter faculty members, who seem to have accepted this, adjusted to it, and even conformed to it. Others, not so successfully. In fact there is an element of bitterness on the part of at least some.

Hewitt: Let me ask you about another incident from the early 1960s which I guess you weren't involved in directly, but it seems like everyone has vivid memories of this. That is the Johns Committee investigation on campus.

Robertson: Oh boy, the Johns Committee. Yes indeed! I have some vivid memories of the Johns Committee. Those were days when it really looked dark for the University because we had just gotten underway. We were just getting off the ground as it were. Suddenly this happens to us, all of a sudden. The Johns Committee comes in and jumps on it with both feet. As a result it took us a bit of time to recover. People in Florida were very gullible, and they believed many of the accusations that were tossed at the University of South Florida at that time, that we are mass of perverts and antichrists and one thing and another. Of course, there were some people in the community who are willing to believe
that even today. It did hurt. It was a real step backwards for us and a very unfortunate kind of development that took place. I'm sure there were a few people who were on the faculty or on the staff at that particular time who were undesirable for one reason or another and perhaps this did succeed in shaking loose, I'm not sure, but it seemed to me a rather unfortunate and clumsy way of going about doing it. It was very unfortunate. My memory of the Johns' investigation, it just took the University quite a long time to recover from that particular experience. Some of my colleagues were more closely associated with it than I and could tell you a good deal more about it. Are you talking with Professor Harkness by any chance?

Hewitt: Yes, as a matter of fact later this afternoon.

Robertson: You will have an opportunity because he actually knows more about that than I do.

Hewitt: I'll remember to ask him. When the Basic Studies College was dismantled, was the American Studies department one of the original departments that came out of that dismantling?

Robertson: No, American Studies was something that was created new. American Idea has no relationship to American Studies at all. They are two completely different kinds of points of view. The emphasis in American Studies, as you know, is principally, of course it is interdisciplinary to be sure, but we take into account a much larger number of things. We deal with literature, architecture, music, philosophy, and you name it. If it is American, it is on
our agenda. We deal with it at least superficially. Of course, it can't be treated in depth in all instances. We can't possibly to that. But nonetheless, this was something that the American Idea did not attempt to do and obviously that was just a program which was made up of two, and under the quarter system three, courses. Whereas in our department, we have a much larger core of courses, both undergraduate and graduate level courses in American Studies. American Idea was something that was rather unique I would say under the old basic studies system. You would be hard pressed to find anything similar in many ways, but American Studies programs exist all across the country. Of course you can find them in virtually any reputable institution.

Hewitt: Did the people who are now in American Studies, who were from the early faculty or people who were in the department in the early years, did they come directly from Basic Studies or the College of Liberal Arts to a department of American Studies or were you scattered about in other departments and then sort of forged an American Studies program?

Robertson: I came directly. I had been with the College of Basic Studies until such time as it ... Well really, I left before it had become dismantled and came into American Studies. We were underway in the latter part of the 1960s. This department really didn't get started until 1967 or 1968. Of course it was 1970 that Basic Studies was finally done in. As a result I was out of Basic Studies before it actually collapsed, so in a sense, I left before the ship sank. Professor Harkness, for example, was in Social
Sciences for a period of time. He left directly from American Idea and went to Social Science for a period and then came here later to American Studies because his Ph.D. degree is in American Studies from the University of Minnesota, just as mine is. As a matter of fact, we both come from the same institution.

Hewitt: You were also involved in the establishment of a black studies program. Could you talk about when that occurred? What were some of the forces?

Robertson: I'm trying to recall ... I don't know, my memory about this is very hazy and I don't know whether you can really count it as being reliable. As I mentioned before I seem to remember a committee dealing with the, looking at the feasibility of initiating, a black studies program at the University. I don't recall whether this was done while I was still back teaching the American Idea or whether it was later after I had already come into American Studies and we were deliberating all this.

Hewitt: I think the actual black studies program wasn't initiated until the very late 60s or early 70s.

Robertson: It may have come into being approximately the same time as the American Studies program. I may well have been already in American Studies and this was a consideration of black studies as a program. I recall that we ran into alot of flack on this from certain sources that black studies programs were being dropped at some institutions where they had been already initiated, but they were not accomplishing much. That what you have when you get a black studies degree and I'm sure they asked the same thing, "What
do you have when you get an American Studies degree?" It's not at all unusual to hear that question. It seems to me that it was approximately that time. I served on the committee with several of my colleagues and most of them I don't even recall. I do remember that we looked at this thing over a period of time and came up with a kind of mixed recommendation. We had one or two members of the committee who were a little hesitant about going all out, but I think the consensus was really a positive one for the establishment of a black studies program at the University of South Florida.

Hewitt: That program ended up over in Social Science?

Robertson: Social Sciences, right.

Hewitt: It was part of the interdisciplinary program. Do you have any memory of whether there were black faculty involved in developing this program or was this something that the faculty in general or the administration . . .

Robertson: To tell you the truth, I don't remember that there were very many black faculty around at that time. We began to accumulate a black faculty at the University of South Florida when we initiated the black studies program. I really don't recall . . . I'm sure that in the charter faculty members there were no people who were black. I do recall one or two people who taught in the American Idea program when I was over there. There were black people from the community who would teach part-time in the program and that was largely through the efforts of Dr. Warner, whose name I
mentioned earlier before and who had a great deal of interest and sympathy for the black community and with efforts toward initiating the black studies program at the University.

Hewitt: One of the other committees that you were on dealt with the residency status of students.

Robertson: That was a real headache as a matter of fact. As you might imagine, we have . . . I'm sure that it remains so even today. I would not envy the person who has that particular responsibility. I think I observed here just a short time ago that the regents made a decision that no longer were they going to accept the fact that a person who had resided in Florida just for a period of time necessarily qualifies them for residency status which will make the matter a little bit more simple at least in terms of its resolution. But at that time we had no such guideline to go by. It was just a matter of trying to feel your way, and you didn't know the degree to which the student was actually here to make this a permanent home or whether he was indeed just here simply to attend the University. Believe me, that was a major headache. You ran the risk of antagonizing large numbers of people in decision making levels. Obviously decision making in that instance is extremely important, financially, for the people involved because there is a wide difference between resident fees and non-resident fees as you well know.

Hewitt: I went through that myself out at Berkeley. I tried to claim California residency instead of . . .
Robertson: I can recall losing a little sleep over questions that would come up from time to time involving someone's issue of residency. That was a real headache. I'll never do that again.

Hewitt: Speaking of students, could you tell me a little bit of your memory of student activism in the late '60s, early '70s at USF? Was there activism? Was it visible?

Robertson: I would say not as visible and certainly not as blatant as it was at a good many other institutions. Certainly not on par with California, for example. No question about that. I do recall that on one occasion there was at least an instance in which they attempted to blockade the president's office and do some things of that kind. There were frequent marches around the Administration building. Occasionally there were gatherings on the far side of the campus over near the residence halls to protest their presence in Vietnam. This was at the time in which I found students in class more outspoken, certainly, on issues than they had been prior to that time. Students were far more likely to dispute issues perhaps than anywhere before or they may have been since.

Hewitt: Were there faculty members who were also involved?

Robertson: Indeed. There were several faculty members, as a matter of fact, some of whom were very much involved. In fact one or two of them were arrested on one occasion; they were that much involved in what was going on. But usually when that occurred it was an instance of a faculty member sort of innocently getting involved because he was there in an attempt to bring some sort of peace to
the situation and attempted to calm things down. Somehow he got
snatched up and hauled away. This was a very unfortunate kind of
development, but nonetheless it did happen on one or two
occasions. They just assumed because this guy was out there in
the front of the entire group that he was up to no good.

Hewitt: Like the Johns Committee, do you think student activism of the
late '60s had a negative impact on how the community saw USF?

Robertson: I think that probably, not just USF, but probably the universities
and colleges at large. This was an attitude that was fairly
prevalent. All you need to do is have something, of course,
unfortunate happen at one institution and all college and
universities are lumped in that general category. The tragic
occurrence at Kent, for example, was a kind of thing that people
agonized about and rightfully so. Many times universities were
somehow held accountable for the fact that, you know, . . . they
had nothing whatsoever to do with what happened at Kent University
at that particular time. So, yes, I had the feeling that there
was some negative reaction in the community, but I don't think it
was necessarily directed toward USF specifically. I have the
feeling that it was a more generalized hostility towards
universities at large.

Hewitt: When do you think was the period when USF had . . . You mentioned
in terms of students being more willing to speak up in class and
be more outspoken. Do you think that the late 60s were the period
when USF had the most liveliness in terms of student, faculty, and
administration interaction? It sounds like there were alot of
things—that the Basic Studies program was still going on, but other colleges were developing and the Johns Committee was past, at least in people's memories—was that a high point at USF in those years?

Robertson: I would tend to look upon it as so. I think that there were a lot of things about that particular period, the latter part of the 1960s, that were positive and good. I, at least, enjoyed my students at the time. I didn't always agree with them. Nonetheless, they were challenging, they were interesting, and they stood for something, even though it may not be something with which you agree. And as you said, the Johns Committee was something in the distant past, at that particular point, and the College of Basic Studies was still under operation. In brief it was a pretty good time I would say around '67 or '68.

Hewitt: When you think back over your 25 years here, what would you say have been the most important developments at USF, either positive ones or negative ones?

Robertson: I should think, for example, right at the beginning one of the most positive ones was the concept of general interdisciplinary education which was initiated by a handful of people. The president himself, John Allen, was someone who was vitally interested in that particular aspect of the curriculum. Sid French had written several books on the matter. Russell Cooper, who formally was at the University of Arizona, was yet another. I remember virtually all the deans in those early years were people that supported that particular principal, even though they might
be the dean of business administration or education or whatever the case might be. That was true of Jean Battle in education and Charlie Milliken who was in business administration at the time. I think that was a major innovative program which the University had at that particular point. That was certainly one of the positive things. There is no question about it. Then I have the feeling that the death of the College of Basic Studies was one of the negative things that took place. It was rather unfortunate. If you had been reading the Chronicle of Higher Education recently, you'll notice that there is a great deal of agitation that seems to come and go in a series of ups and downs. The revival of the general education programs seems to have a great deal of emphasis at the present time. I think we have one of the best ones that I have ever seen in operation or that I have read about right here at the University of South Florida. So that was not so good. The general trend, which I have commented on before, which I feel has evolved upon the earliest principal from the legislature and the Board of Regents. They forced conformity, accountability, and all of these things that have made for a kind of straight jacket, in a sense, that you no longer have the flexibility, at least it seems to me. I no longer feel that I do have in my relationship with students and fellow faculty members. That has been a negative thing, but I don't feel it is the fault of anyone here at the University of South Florida. I have the feeling that it is the kind of thing that has been put upon us and there would probably have been no escape from it anyway. As we grew and we became larger and larger, that was inevitable that we
would take on more and more of the characteristics of a state university.

Hewitt: Well, it will be interesting to see if in the next 25 years we rediscover Basic Studies in one form or another and rediscover the accent on learning. Thank you very much Dr. Robertson for participating in this project.

Robertson: You are most welcome!