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Comment

I would like to take up the editor's invitation to readers to share brief comments on issues being raised in the journal. It seems such an easy and worthwhile thing to do, but it turns out to be difficult. Why expose my puny thoughts about things that wise and experienced people have written about? What would be the point of purring over some aspects or growling over others?

I could go on hedging my bets like this . . . Instead I will get on with three short growls. (*See Vol. 4, No. 1*)

Peter Hilton, writing on current trends, wobbles impersonally between the use of *I* and *we* with an occasional interspersed *one*. "Let us organise the discussion around the 'in and out' principle," he writes. Let us not play this tiresome game from the sixties, I say. Why should order relations with fractions, for example, be ruled out of an elementary teacher's collection of things that might be negotiated? Because addition should only be given prominence "at the beginning of a fairly systematic study of elementary probability." Should experts decree like this what can or cannot be considered in other people's classrooms?

There is a lot of the authentic *I* in Stephen Brown's discussion of problem-generation; perhaps also a bit of an indulgent self as well. I like the sparkling writing, but did not find, despite the author's artless protestations at the beginning, that he was saying anything new. What I did find was that I was being browbeaten by the presentation

of ideas that did not check out in my experience. Consider one of the tests of so-called divergence in which people are asked to name as many uses of a brick as they can. I have always found that, after the first experience, people can go on doing this very easily—it becomes a facile, uncommitted game. The same can be true about problem-posing. Given just a little experience it is easy to play "what if?" So what? It is not so easy to choose, commit to, and solve, the *significant* problems.

I much enjoyed Geoffrey Howson's careful discussion of possible problems for mathematical education. He comments that the authors of the Cockcroft report would not appear to share a Saudi Arabian view that the purpose of primary (elementary) school mathematics is "to move children's thoughts from the concrete world around them to the abstract, and to facilitate their movement from a preoccupation with matters temporal to thoughts of things spiritual." The irony is delicate and donnish, so that we do not quite know where the author stands himself. If it is not clear whether we are being asked to applaud Cockcroft, there is certainly more than a hint of positivist disdain for middle eastern metaphysics. But I did not think that many primary school teachers I know would cavil at the stated purpose of primary school mathematics though they might not use the same words. In fact, the more I try to interpret the Saudi Arabian view the more sensible and likely does it seem. Howson's other concerns appear rather unreal by comparison.

Finally, may I report that *FLM* is, for me and many others I discuss it with, one of the very few journals in mathematical education worth reading. Long may it flourish! (But, please, could it have shorter book lists?)

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