

TALKING ABOUT EDITING

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This article is a reprint of an edited tape transcript of a conversation, held in 1972, between David Wheeler (DHW in the following conversation and founding editor of FLM) and David Fielker (DF). At that time, David Fielker was about to take over from David Wheeler the editorship of the journal, Mathematics Teaching (MT) and the discussion centred on MT policy. I was struck, when I first read this piece, how similar some of the issues were to those I have faced as editor of FLM with 'teachers' replaced by 'mathematics educators' whilst keeping the learning of mathematics by pupils and their teachers in mind. The conversation was available through the web-site of the Association of Teachers of Mathematics (ATM), <http://www.atm.org.uk/>, who, along with David Fielker, gave their permission for this version to be published here. [ed.]

DF: How do you reconcile making do with the articles that are submitted against any sort of policy about what sort of articles ought to appear?

DHW: A journal like this works under certain constraints. One that ATM adopted was the attempt to talk to teachers of all interests and levels, and in some ways this is already a big difficulty in trying to form a coherent policy. It's rather negative merely to say that there should be something in each issue of interest to some teacher at any level - which is what I've tried to ensure. But I've not found it possible to get enough articles of the sort I would like, in order to be able to fill the magazine with those.

DF: What sort of articles have been missing?

DHW: I suppose it's a question of balance. Too many people are concerned to be writing for people whose main interest was mathematics, rather than in teaching it. Another constraint is that I've not been able to spend as much time editing MT in a way that would be ideal. That means that at times I have been content to fill it with articles that I wasn't particularly enthusiastic about, but which it would have taken too much hard work to replace.

DF: Presumably any editor has to bear in mind the sort of thing their readers want to read, but at the same time try to formulate some sort of policy with regard to the philosophy of the Association.

DHW: That's true. Although the editor has to fit with what people want to read, he or she can influence that slightly, because they may find that some things which they would never have gone out of the way to read, because they happened to be there, they did read them and found their areas of interest slightly widened.

DF: But a general shortage of articles, particularly of the sort you want, means that occasionally you have to publish articles that you wouldn't otherwise do?

DHW: Well, yes - but it wouldn't be unreasonable to have, in any one issue, which might carry a range of topics,

two of these to be straight bits of mathematics. I get uneasy if I have to publish more than that number of pieces which are virtually straight mathematics with no direct application to teaching it; and yet I have had to do that at times because of the balance of material that I get.

DF: John Parker in the *ATM Supplement* said that all teachers of mathematics occasionally ought to do some mathematics, and I think this is important. I wondered how far it was relevant to display this teachers' activity in the bulletin for the benefit of others.

DHW: I don't know. Some people might be stimulated by seeing almost a straight exposition of a piece of mathematics to go away and take it further, but I'm sure that these are in the minority. One of the things that I've tried to do was to take contributions from teachers, and from children, of pieces of mathematical investigations, in the hope that readers would learn that it was worth doing this as an activity.

DF: Yes, but I still wonder how relevant it is for teachers to do this for the benefit of other teachers, when for teaching it's more relevant to see pupils' work.

DHW: True, but I have found that there's a considerable shortage of pupils' work, probably because there aren't enough teachers who value this side of children's activity sufficiently to encourage it, or to bring it to the point where it's actually publishable.

DF: Do you feel that the bulletin is a vehicle for teachers' own mathematics? Because there is perhaps a distinction to be made between an enthusiastic teacher who has suddenly come across a bit of mathematics that they're interested in and they want to publicise it, and a minor piece of research that doesn't get into the usual research magazines because it's not at a high enough level.

DHW: You will occasionally get sent pieces of work, where one feels that the objective of the writers is really to add another title to their list of annual publications rather than that they've got in mind the nature of *Mathematics Teaching*. Even so, occasionally along comes a piece which one feels was motivated by this, but seems worthy of a wider circulation.

DF: In other words each piece has to be judged on its merits.

DHW: Yes, but I would lean more favourably towards some kinds than others. If it's sufficiently rare to be worth encouraging, I will try to include it, whereas if an article is on a straight mathematical topic I don't feel the same pressure.

DF: Are there articles you feel compelled to publish to avoid disappointing the author? I'm thinking of pupils in particular, and possibly young teachers who haven't written before and need some encouragement.

DHW: Yes, but unless one happens to have some personal contact with the writer it may not be possible to know when this is the situation.

DF: You obviously had difficulty in writing one editorial last summer. Do you usually have difficulty in finding something to write about or do you have a few pet subjects up your sleeve?

DHW: [laughs] Well, I've tried most of the time to put into the editorial an ingredient in the magazine that I thought was missing elsewhere. Of course the things that I've written were within my own interest.

DF: I suppose there are some editorials which are a sort of guide to the issue in that they point out one or two articles and perhaps connections between them. Do you feel that there is any purpose in having an editorial at all rather than an article by the editor, which is something rather different?

DHW: No, I don't. I have used the editorial almost always as just my own particular space. An editorial which does draw out interconnections and make observations about the articles can be very useful. On the other hand there is a danger that the editor may be pointing to things that he or she wants the readers to find in the issue. There's something to be said on both sides, but I felt that if I wrote about the contents of an issue I would find it very hard to resist using my editorial position to stress the importance of some articles to the exclusion of others, and I thought that that wasn't a good thing to do.

DF: You have occasionally used the editorial to make some topical comment on recent events or publications.

DHW: Well, one of the advantages of MT is that it's a contemporary magazine. There isn't usually a very long delay between something being written and being published, and at times the gap can have been as short as a month, so that it has been possible at times to comment on something topical without feeling that by the time it was out it would no longer be topical.

DF: What would you say was the special thing that MT has to offer?

DHW: If you're editing one of the many journals in the field you want to feel that you have a specific contribution to make. I think MT has a place in the real discussion of the problems of mathematical education in concrete terms, sometimes in philosophical terms too, and one of the things MT has tried to do is to use theory to illuminate practice. It's not a magazine essentially of 'tips for teaching' without any kind of a viewpoint. I don't mean that it is improper to have anything in that might be regarded as a teaching tip: that would be silly. But teachers may often look for something that is immediately practically useful. If the magazine stops at that level it's really failing to do what we earlier said that a journal can do, and that is gradually to shift the taste and influence the opinions of the people who read it.

DF: One also tries to inspire teachers to think more deeply about their teaching.

DHW: Yes. There are certainly times when I have deliberately chosen to print an article which I found provocative, where I thought that perhaps the publication of it would encourage people, even if they resisted it, by that very resistance to reach a clearer understanding of their own views and their stand on the issues raised.

DF: It seems that we have tended to get more articles from people who are not actually in the classroom. Is this because people who used to write articles are still writing, but

they've all moved out of the classroom, or are there just fewer people around in the classroom who are willing to write about what they do?

DHW: This is a serious problem, not unique to MT. In the early days, the majority of those involved in the association were practising teachers. But a number of those are no longer teaching. The other thing is that the conditions of lecturers in colleges and departments of education are much more favourable to the production of writing; people have more time and they are encouraged to write. The ordinary class teacher has to make a determined and desperate effort to find time to write, and there isn't really very much in their professional life to encourage them. This is very unfortunate, because the person in the classroom has a unique contribution to make, and it's sad that very often this doesn't happen. The majority of readers are teachers; it's unfortunate that only a minority of those who write for it are.

DF: Perhaps some of the opportunities for younger teachers or newer members are in more local activity. We have many branches, and a couple of regions, who organise activity at a local level, and this includes writing. Possibly this is where classroom articles go.

DHW: Well, there are now other outlets, and some of the material that would in earlier days have gone into MT now perhaps gets siphoned off before reaching that point by publication in regional newsletters and publications.

DF: Have you ever felt that it would be worthwhile reproducing some of these?

DHW: Perhaps two or three have been reproduced in the past. But I have on the whole felt that republication of something already available was not the best way to use MT. In general, except for a few articles written by people who weren't active members of ATM but who had written contributions that I thought would be of interest, I felt it was better the association should live on material specially written for it.

DF: I can see the argument for publishing material from abroad that is not available here, but I would have thought that it might help and encourage the young teacher who feels diffident about writing, but who is quite willing to write for a local publication; and possibly the republication of some of those articles might give encouragement to develop further their own writing.

DHW: I agree with you.

DF: What else would you like to say?

DHW: Only that I can't help talking as a person who's finished his stint at the job, and therefore not only about what I have done but also my awareness of things I would have liked to have done and never managed to do. In some ways I would like to feel that I was starting a five-year stint on MT with a little more time, and as much enthusiasm, as I have at this very moment, sustained throughout that whole period. I think I could make a better job of it than I did before.

DF: Well, you've made a very good job of it anyway.

DHW: Thank you very much! I suppose I would have kept it on a little while longer if I hadn't had to give it up because I was moving [*to Canada - ed.*]. I've enjoyed doing it, but at the same time, five years is enough, and I've probably done all that I could, with my present energies, to it and it'll benefit from a fresh impetus and a new outlook.