

# EDITORIAL CHANGES

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It is December 30th, 2006 as I start to write this editorial. As I left university, I remember beginning a letter to a friend by writing: *Ch- ch- ch- ch- change, turn and face the strange, ch- ch- changes* (David Bowie, *Hunky Dory*). Two changes are currently uppermost in my mind - 2007 is the last year of my editorship of FLM and, for those of you who have not yet heard, perhaps not even knowing of the man, Dick Tahta, a close friend, died peacefully and unexpectedly in early December, 2006.

The "strange", waiting for me in the year after leaving university turned out to be a meeting with Dick. He was my PGCE (one-year teacher-education course) tutor at the University of Exeter in the UK. I was twenty-two years old. Dick was a communicator, who enjoyed collaborative working with many people in and out of mathematics education. After his death, more than 30 years later, the consequent silence was deafening.

This editorial is not written as a formal contribution to a remembrance of Dick [1]. I will tell a personal story to illustrate the richness of communicating with him and follow this by acknowledging his presence in the life of this journal.

*Talking about reading:* I was often part of an e-discussion group with Dick the focus of which would be a particular book. Given his entry to hospital, a group of us postponed the start of work on *Aesthetics of change* (Keeney, 1983). When I told Dick this, he commented that he had not been able to wait, had gone ahead and read the book already. He reported enjoying it. He had then gone on to re-read *Pragmatics of human communication* (Watzlawick, Bavelas and Jackson, 1967), a book I know well. This conversation was, as usual, on e-mail. "What I took from that book was 'equivifinality'", I wrote. "Ah, my attention had been taken by 'punctuation.'", he replied. We explored how these ideas were played out in each other's thinking, where the connections to our previous experiences were, not to find 'truth', nor to know what the authors 'meant' (they were not there to ask) but to be able to see more richly and complexly.

"Equivifinality", to me (see p. 127 in Watzlawick *et al.*) is a different take on cause and effect. It does not matter where you begin, what the initial conditions are, but in systems of interactions it is the organisation and structure that are important. Having studied the development of one teacher over ten years, specifically by spending time in classrooms, what I understood by this idea became an explanatory principle. Each class of students of the teacher developed a different culture over time from different starting points and yet, visitors to those different classrooms over time have reported similar things.

How could I account for such a phenomenon? Although I was more aware of the differences between this teacher's classrooms, his observations of students' behaviours, commented on to the students, allowed for patterns to emerge at a meta-communicative level to do with the respect given to students, the quality of the listening and the way that the students expected to make meaning in their discussions. Such a culture was seen as different to observers' usual experiences of mathematics classrooms. Relatively simple strategies, used from the start of the year, support the developing culture during the first lessons with a new group, such as this teacher consciously not being the second person to speak after there has been an invitation to discuss and establishing a discipline of one contribution being discussed at length before other points are made. At the communicative level, the classroom cultures that students develop to work with each other are unique to each class. The teacher's role seems to be to meta-comment on students' behaviours and each student's task is to learn mathematics.

I think about change a lot as a teacher educator. My task seems to be to facilitate my student teachers to be able to see what is happening in their classrooms in a different way to how they were taught themselves so that they have more choices how to act.

Dick's attention had been taken by "punctuation" (see p. 42), how things can become difficult in communication. The full phrase in the book is "punctuation of sequences of events" and a simple example might help:

P writes a letter to O proposing a joint venture and inviting O's participation. O replies in the affirmative, but the letter is lost in the mail. After a while P concludes that O is ignoring his invitation and resolves to disregard him in turn. O, on the other hand, feels offended that his answer is ignored and also decides not to contact P any more. From this point their silent feud may last forever, unless they decide to investigate what happened to their communications, that is, unless they begin to metacommunicate. (p. 96)

Another example would be differences in reactions that can lead to misunderstandings or confusions through hearing what someone says differently to what they thought said. Look back at the title of this writing. Is this an editorial about change? Is it a piece about changing editorial practices? How do you read it? A different way? What did I, the editor mean when I wrote it? As an editor, I am aware of a practice of what might be considered to be over-communing, used to support writers in seeing how readers might hear

what they write. I am also aware that what a reader takes from writing is not ever under control of the writer. In writing the header for this piece, not punctuating with a central 'hyphen' led to a useful ambiguity because, in fact, I am reflecting on editorial changes as well as writing an editorial that I might have entitled *changes*.

In talking with Dick about what we had each noticed, we were struck by how equifinality had spoken to me given my need to describe observed events and Dick's interest had been sparked by his previous interests and experiences (for example, in recently counselling couples). The common interest for us was with metacommunication, talking about communication – and we were, now, talking about meta-communication, which is meta-meta-communication! I will miss such conversations, they seem to be important for my being as a mathematics teacher educator and teacher, but thank Dick for them being part of my life.

Many readers of FLM did not know Dick personally but, as Judit Moschkovich, one of the writers in this issue, wrote "only knew him through his extraordinary writing":

Right now, what I remember most vividly is the FLM special issue on psychodynamics in mathematics education [2]. One of the faculty on my dissertation committee kept asking me to read Lacan as she thought it was relevant to my work [...] so when I saw that FLM issue, I was thrilled that Dick had made that connection for us. (personal communication)

We change as we are open to noticing something. We are vulnerable to what we have done the work to connect to. Most things we do not notice nor remember. Each time I go back and re-read a book, given that I am a different person who reads with different needs I become aware of different things. Life is not smooth. Personal change is not, as John Mason once commented, like putting on a new suit of clothes. It takes time to integrate the new. We fall over as we try to walk as children. All these awarenesses came through my contact with Dick, who had similar rich interactions with a wide range of people. Hence, the awareness of silence in those first days after his death. However, the extraordinary writings of Dick are still there and having re-read many pieces during late December to identify 'fillers' at the end of articles for this issue, the silence is passing.

*Dick and FLM:* Dick, himself, missed his longstanding communication with David Wheeler, the founding editor of this journal after David's death in 2000. In the life of any institution, there are strands of connection and, in the case of FLM, many of these can be traced back to the founding editor David Wheeler. Dick and David shared "the common ancestor" (Pimm, 2001) of Caleb Gattegno. Indeed, the "delightfully unassuming name of the journal itself" echoed Gattegno's series of books "for the teaching of mathematics".

What is of interest to me here is Dick's ever present support of and interest in this journal. A piece of his writing 'About geometry' appears in FLM1(1). He was an active advisory board member, 1980-1999. When I took over as editor, I invited him to re-join but he said "You should be getting young blood on the board" I have tried to do this. He was willing to support, however, writing detailed, erudite and supportive reviews of any article that I sent to him, often

expressly saying what David Wheeler, as editor, might have thought or done with the piece. He would also read each issue and talk on e-mail about his reactions to articles and aspects he liked and did not like so much.

I would be interested in publishing pieces of writing developed from reading Dick's writing, what has been noticed, taken away and used, like a review essay. FLM 27(3) will be a special issue of conversations and it might be that some contributions would go in that issue, sharing past conversations with him.

As something ends there are also beginnings. At the start of volume 28 there will be new editors of this journal. Brent Davis, the current Associate Editor (now David Robitaille Chair in Mathematics Education at University of British Columbia) will take over the mantle with Richard Barwell, (University of Ottawa) and, continuing his roles as Associate Editor and Editor for articles in French, Luis Radford. Richard Barwell, one of those newer members of the community, has already worked on ZDM and ESM issues as co-editor. I am excited by the possibilities inherent in these three energies committed to the journal. I might be turning to face the "strange" again, but "strange" is simply different, and different does not have to be interpreted as bad and uncomfortable, even if, when wondering about a particular piece of writing and considering the question "who would I show it to" for reviewing ([2], 2004), the new editors will not be able to say, Dick.

## Notes

[1] There is a formal obituary of Dick in the UK press: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/obituaries/story/0,,1983173,00.html>, accessed 9th January, 2007.

[2] Listing of Dick Tahta's contributions to FLM:

- (1981) About geometry, **1**(1), 2-9
- (1981) **1**(3), 3
- (1981) On poetry and mathematics, **1**(3), 43-47
- Caleb Gattegno, Arthur Powell, Steve Shuller and Dick Tahta (1982) A seminar on problem solving **2**(1), 42-46
- (1984) Research problems in mathematics education - I, **4**(1), 46-47
- (1984) Comment, **4**(2), 32
- (1986) In Calypso's arms, **4**(1), 17-23
- (1986) A letter and a reply, **6**(2), 39-40
- (1990) Papuans are almost always right, **10**(3), 40-41
- (1993) Editorial, **13**(1), *special issue on psychodynamics in mathematics education*, 2-3
- (1993) Victoire sur les maths, **13**(1), 47-48
- (1996) Mind, matter, and mathematics, **16**(3), 17-21
- (1997) Under the banyan tree, **17**(2), 28-30
- Dick Tahta and David Pimm (2001) Seeing voices, **21**(2), 20-25
- Laurinda Brown, David A. Reid, Dick Tahta, Brent Davis, Bill Barton and Vicki Zack (2003), Loved articles, **23**(3), 29-30
- (2004) Who would I show it to, **24**(1), 3-6
- (2005) Teaching mathematics, **25**(1), 2-3
- Barbara Ball, Alf Coles, Dave Hewitt, Dave Wilson, Laurie Jacques, Kath Cross, Dick Tahta, Laurinda Brown, Gill Hatch and Pete Griffin (2005) Talking about subject-specific pedagogy, **25**(3), 32-36

## References

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- Pimm, D. (2001) 'Editorial', *For the Learning of Mathematics* **21**(2), 3
- Watzlawick, P., Bavelas, J. and Jackson, D. (1967) *Pragmatics of human communication: a study of interactional patterns, pathologies and paradoxes*, New York, NY, W. W. Norton