

TRANSFORMING

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Laurinda: One of the ways I have been working on transforming into the editor of FLM is by re-reading my personal copies of the journal going back to 1(1) I was struck by something you wrote for your editorial in the issue dedicated to the memory of David Wheeler (21(2), p. 3): “For me, this is still – and likely always will be – David Wheeler’s journal”. David Wheeler will be the silent presence within this conversation about transformation (alongside that of Caleb Gattegno) as we think about who we are as editors.

I edited another journal, *Mathematics Teaching* (MT), for five years. This is one of the journals of the UK Association of Teachers of Mathematics (ATM), an organisation founded by Caleb Gattegno. I took over directly from Dick Tahta in 1987 with MT120 and David Wheeler had also edited this journal earlier in its history. You and I worked together on that one more than ten years ago, with you as the reviews editor. Why were you interested in becoming a journal editor?

David: I learnt the craft of editing while working at the Open University for exactly fifteen years (Jan 1st, 1983 – December 31st, 1997) There, I had the good fortune to work alongside the late John Fauvel – who among his many other extraordinary talents was probably the most caring and consummate academic editor on the planet He and I worked together closely on the ‘History of mathematics’ course which appeared during the late 1980s John taught me much, most particularly how to see not only what was there, but what *could* be there, how to see possibilities for what a piece could be

So, a simple chronological answer to your question is that I started editing FLM at the precise point that I stopped being both an author and academic editor for the Open University It was when I started my North American career at age forty-five as a face-to-face university teacher. I became a journal editor, in part, to be able to continue editing.

One further answer to your question is that I now find it easier (and more seductive) than writing itself. It has been an

important place where I have invested some of my sense of precision and exactness, some seeking after a limited perfection, though I also see editing as a creative rather than a mechanical endeavour, a creative interaction with the text to enhance its meaning.

So when I talk about editing, I do not simply mean copy-editing. Emma Tennant (1992, p 24), admittedly tongue-in-cheek, defines a copy editor as a “complete stranger who rewrites your [article] to suit his/her own ideas and changes the position of every comma”. Notice I changed her word ‘book’ to mine ‘article’, though unfortunately there was no comma to move. And punctuation within quotations is always sacrosanct anyway.

There was a wonderful comment my father made when I started at the Open University: “You mean they pay you to correct other people’s spelling and grammar?” He had struggled with me through the vagaries of O-level English when I was a teenager. This observation arose from him knowing full well that, back then at least, nothing to do with language could have been called a strength of mine.

While editing FLM, I primarily operated below the level of the sentence and, *pace* Tennant, preservation of ‘the ideas’ was my primary intent, while trying to enhance their expression. Even so, I was considerably more interventionist as an editor than David Wheeler was. He once commented to me that he felt he owed authors enough rope to hang themselves. For me, this was not an expression of a lack of care on his part – he cared enormously both about the journal and what appeared in it. It derived more from his clear sensibility about the differentiation between himself and the author, about where the boundary of his editorial responsibility lay (as he saw it) and where it ended. Something each of us needs to decide.

I do not know whether my editing was invisible, but I never heard complaints from authors. But then I almost never heard from authors once they were published. I recall Dick Tahta, after editing the special issue of FLM 13(1) on psychodynamic issues in mathematics education, sitting back and waiting for the flood of response. You could almost hear the wolfish grin of David Wheeler across the Atlantic waiting for time to set Dick straight. David knew how little echo there was to be heard.

Laurinda: I have found it easy writing for myself (in order to learn) and have always done it. Public writing has been another matter and I have a sense that I find editing easier than writing too. Dick Tahta once asked me why I did not edit myself and I found that a freeing comment. Writing and editing are different functionings; I now write and then leave the writing to lie fallow for a while before going back to it as editor, with different sensibilities and awarenesses uppermost. I have been focusing on my writing for about ten years now.

In preparing to indulge my love of editing once more, I have set myself a challenge to continue writing (although not necessarily in the pages of FLM!). Already, though, I am feeling what you termed the seduction of editing. It has become my priority in these early stages with this journal. What was your experience of the interplay between writing and editing in relation to FLM?

David: During pretty much the same time period that I was educating my editing eye, I was developing greater proficiency as an academic writer for an external audience (one hopefully larger than an examining committee), including publishing some articles in FLM. The converse side to writing is reading: this was certainly one key means for me to improve as a writer, namely by reading a wide range of others’ work (good, bad and indifferent), something that editing this journal also required me to do. I think it is important for a writer to select authors to emulate, as well as ones to avoid – not simply poor or awkward writers, but ones closer to home than that, ones whom one might end up writing like if attention is not paid.

In relation to my professional reading, I had been intrigued from its outset by the space for writing of certain sorts that David Wheeler had created and nurtured through this journal. Over time, I encountered quite varied types of writing which also covered a broad range of topics that I did not see written about elsewhere, in other journals. And I selfishly wanted that space to continue in a somewhat like-minded way, not least because it had provided a home for a number of pieces of my own. Ironically, while editor, I thought I should not publish pieces of my own (other than the occasional editorial), though I made an exception for the memorial issue you mentioned at the beginning, 21(2). One hope, once I finally stop being its editor, is that I might return to writing for FLM – and elsewhere. It has certainly been the case that, for me at least, writing and editing this journal have proven fairly antagonistic toward one another. I wish you well in your desire to maintain both.

Laurinda: This transitional issue of FLM has been edited by us both in some ways. Three of the articles and the *Communications* are the last of ‘yours’ and the transition is made through a collection of short pieces from members of the new advisory board talking about past articles from the journal that they have found important in some way. There are a few comments in that collection that are similar to yours here and from David Reid an explicitly stated wish for such writing, not in the standard form of research reports, to continue to appear.

I share that wish. David Wheeler had also wanted to encourage discussion in the pages of the journal, though he never thought the results he achieved in this regard were that successful. I would also like to receive responses to articles as short communications. The wish is a long way from the reality, however. Any thoughts on what you have done as editor?

David: One small but important thing I worked hard at was ensuring FLM could be trusted. By that I mean that quotations were accurate and references complete and reliable. It is perhaps a little-appreciated fact just how many quotations and references in almost any submitted article (no matter by whom) have inaccuracies. I remember once asking Eric Love whose responsibility it is to see such things are right, the author or the editor, to which he replied ‘Both, naturally’. And rather than talk about responsibility, I prefer here to talk about trust. I think a journal needs to be trusted: to be trustworthy is to be worthy of our readers’ trust. And attention to and care for detail is part of how that trust is earned.

Reciprocally, in thinking about trustworthy submitters of articles, I am reminded of a famous rock group (which must remain nameless because I have forgotten who it was) auditioning for a replacement lead guitarist. Afterwards, the band complained about the number of perfectly fine guitarists who showed up who did not know the group's numbers, who had not paid the respect of familiarising themselves with the group's actual material beforehand

Laurinda: Yes. Sometimes, when an article comes in for review, I am reminded of the words from an Incredible String Band song from my youth: "Oh, you know all the words and you sung all the notes, But you never quite learned the song, she sang" (Heron, *Funny Little Hedgehog*). It is as though some potential authors have not bothered to read the journal, they have not yet learned the song.

David: While there is no house style for FLM, no compulsory content, topics or citations that *have* to be there, I feel there is nonetheless a definite flavour to many of the articles and hence to the journal as a whole. Part of the compact between potential author and journal is for authors to be aware of that and to respect it at least somewhat (not obeisance, obviously, but awareness nonetheless). Journals embody ways of treating particular issues and hence themes generally have an internal history. The single paragraph about what this journal aims to do, printed on the inside cover of each issue, has changed very little in twenty-three years. *For the Learning of Mathematics* is about just that: articles that, seen broadly, serve the learning of mathematics

Laurinda: I was there at the ATM conference when David Wheeler gave the closing lecture: *Humanising mathematical education* that appeared in MT71 in 1975. I can still hear his voice down the years, speaking while a light snow fell:

I don't expect. And I don't even want, every child to find mathematics an engrossing study, [] But I *would* hope that every child could experience at a few moments [...] the power and excitement of mathematics, [...] so that [...] he [*sic*] at least knows what it is like and whether it is an activity that has a place in his [*sic*] future. (p. 4)

I think that for me I want writing that is 'for the learning of mathematics' to appear in this journal - that seeks to explore the challenge above. Maybe that is why there has been a primary focus on the social, historical and philosophical over time in the journal.

Whatever the reason, from Volume 24 there will be a more collegial feel to the journal with the decisions to appoint two associate editors and have a very active Advisory Board. My life as editor will be a less lonely road than for either you or David Wheeler and there are discussions, starting already, such as the one that led to the *Loved articles* piece in this issue. Brent Davis has been appointed as one of the associate editors and he and I have been enjoying discussing articles and the processes of editing and writing.

At the moment, I am reading *Imagining numbers* by Barry Mazur, finding it fascinating and wanting to have discussions with anyone I meet about it. If you are reading this and have used any of the ideas in the book I would be interested in you writing something for a *Communications* in one of the issues in Volume 24. Maybe that will be an opportunity for you to write too, David.

References

- Mazur, B. (2003) *Imagining numbers (particularly the square root of minus fifteen)*, St. Ives, Allen Lane, the Penguin Press.
Tennant, E. (1992) *The ABC of writing*, London, Faber and Faber.
Wheeler, D. (1975) 'Humanising mathematical education', *Mathematics Teaching* 71, 4-9

The absence of time in mathematics.

In learning mathematics, there is sometimes a clear sequence of steps, one following upon another, that you must go through to understand the math. Missing a step, or doing things out of step, is not advisable. This is one of the underpinnings of Descartes's *Rules for the Direction of the Natural Intelligence*. You must *first* understand step 1 and *then* step 2.

When you read the word *then* in a historical text (e.g., "He then proceeded to state that the guarantee he had given Czechoslovakia no longer in his opinion had validity"), that word can have the effect of framing the present action within a system of time-ordered events. But the word *then* in mathematics ("If X then Y ") is not an elementary chronometer. It tends to mean "therefore," as it partly does in the first line of Shakespeare's sonnet 90, which plays on the words *then*, *when*, and *now*:

*Then hate me when thou wilt, if ever, now,
Now while the world is bent my deeds to cross.*

(Mazur, 2003, pp. 149-150)
