

WHAT THE FIELD REALLY NEEDS ...

BRENT DAVIS

In volume 1, number 1 of *For the Learning of Mathematics*, Founding Editor David Wheeler noted on the inside front cover that this journal was ‘intended for the mathematics educator who is aware that the learning and the teaching of mathematics are complex enterprises about which much remains to be revealed and understood’. This vision was elaborated in his “Suggestions to Authors” on the inside back cover: “Mathematics education” should be interpreted to mean the whole field of human ideas and activities that affect, or could affect, the learning of mathematics’. Those statements have been included, unaltered, in every issue of FLM.

The publication of this issue marks the completion of the 30th volume of the journal. It is also the final issue of under my editorship and, mindful of Wheeler’s comments, I was eager to close my responsibilities with a piece that was historical and current, sensitive to complexities yet undaunted, and attentive to the breadth of influence in contemporary research while still focused. The possibility of such an article presented itself in a piece of writing by John Mason that was commissioned for another purpose.

Actually, the more complete truth is that John was asked to write a retrospective article for FLM but that request was a pretense. Unknown to him, the piece was to be published as the opening chapter in an edited collection (Lerman & Davis, 2009) assembled to honour his contributions over 50 years as a mathematics educator as he officially retired from his position at the Open University in the United Kingdom. However, when John’s completed draft arrived, I realized that it must also be put to the purpose he imagined.

I’ll highlight only a few details from that article that resonate with what I think FLM is all about (as I read its purpose through David Wheeler’s and others’ remarks). John starts his retrospective with a reminder and an admonition: “the purpose of our work is to understand and contribute to student learning of mathematics” (p. 3). Framed by this conviction, in the balance of the writing he narrates the emergence of a rich and robust domain of inquiry through the unfolding of his own career.

John is given to strong statements – always considered, but strong – such as the following:

I suspect that colleagues, especially editors, want to see mathematics education build a coherent and well-founded structure of knowledge. They like to see people building on each others’ work, adding to and refining rather than starting afresh. I wonder however whether this is even possible, much less desirable (p. 7)

In this statement I hear an echo of David Wheeler’s descriptions of the journal and the field. John underscores the resonance by confessing, ‘when I am engaged in my enquiries, I enjoy it most when I am at the overlap between mathematics, psychology and sociology, philosophy and religion’ (*ibid.*).

Among his admonitions is the following:

What the field really needs is some agreement on ways of working, rather than on theoretical frames and stances. We need to build up a vocabulary for how we compare observations, turn them into data, and negotiate meaning amongst ourselves.

I wish I’d said that. But I’m content to borrow it as my closing editorial comment on the collective project of “mathematics education”. For me, this journal’s contribution to the field is its abiding conviction that, to make a contribution, one must travel – be an ethnographer in an unfamiliar theoretical place, listen to others’ languages, break self-defined and self-defining boundaries – and return home to converse with others who have also traveled. FLM is one of our places of conversation.

Thank yous

It has been an honour these past three years to continue laying the path begun by David Wheeler and continued by David Pimm and Laurinda Brown. I would like to express my appreciation to all involved in *For the Learning of Mathematics*, and in particular to Laurinda. She took me on as an Associate Editor with volume 24 and has been an unwavering support throughout my editorship.

‘Thank you’ as well to the Associate Editors, Richard Barwell and Luis Radford, for their efforts. I must also thank members of the Advisory Board for their quick responses to randomly timed submissions. A special note of appreciation goes to Advisory Board member Jill Adler who co-edited (with Deborah Loewenberg Ball) a special issue (vol. 29, no. 3) on teachers’ disciplinary knowledge of mathematics. I would also like to thank the Board of Directors for their ready and capable support of this enterprise. An emphatic note of appreciation goes to Managing Editor Elaine Simmt who oversees the day-to-day workings of the journal.

Finally, I extend best wishes to Richard Barwell as he takes on the editorship with volume 31 of FLM.

Reference

Lerman, S. and Davis, B. (eds.) (2009) *Mathematical action & structures of noticing*, Dordrecht, NL, Sense Publishing.