

# Editorial

*“The views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of the Editor or the Advisory Board.”*

I have often thought, when compiling an issue of *FLM*, that I should print this statement on the title page of each article. Not to disclaim responsibility—that would be nice, at times—but to remind readers that they ought not to believe everything they read, even in *FLM*. Publication of something in these pages doesn't guarantee that it is free from error or bias or wrongheadedness: I wish it did, but I don't see how it could.

For one thing, as has been pointed out by many people on many occasions, mathematics education isn't a discipline, with all the benefits that would bring a consensus (of some sort) about its contents and methods and the ways in which its assertions could be verified. Most of us in mathematics education know mathematics well enough to know that the situation is different there. Perhaps we envy mathematicians, who seem to be able to know, at the time or soon after, whether their work contributes to the mainstream of their subject's development. I'm not sure that the situation is quite that simple even for mathematicians, but it does seem clearer than it is for us. Editors of mathematics journals have standard procedures and safeguards that they use for quality control that depend on the consensus factor—the system of refereeing being the most obvious example.

But I'll turn aside from this tempting sidetrack to take up the question of responsibility. What responsibility do the Editor and Advisory Board of *FLM* have? For what to whom? Or, perhaps better, to whom for what? I find this a difficult question, both in general terms and in its specific application to certain articles that are submitted for publication.

It is easy to say what one hopes to achieve: to move mathematics education in the direction of disciplined enquiry, to raise the level of discussion of crucial issues, to encourage reflection, and so on. But of course, the journal, by itself, can do little to affect these things. It can only print what people will write, and it cannot determine what readers will make of what is written. That one could say exactly the same for any journal brings out the fact *FLM*, like all journals, is embedded in a social nexus that fixes some of the parameters. The question of responsibility emerges

when one explores how much freedom remains.

Since there are so many journals concerned with mathematics education—far too many for any person to keep up with—it seems natural to seek to make some special claim for *FLM* that would give it a small, but special, piece of the action. But if it were too special nobody would read it because nobody would know about it. In order to establish that it is worth reading, the journal must include at least a few articles by writers who have something to say and say it well, or who have a high reputation among journal readers, or both. So necessarily the contents of *FLM* will tend to overlap with the contents of other journals, and the special character becomes diluted.

There are some freedoms with respect to the range and the style of articles, and some with respect to the balance between solicited and unsolicited submissions, which can be taken advantage of, but these do not seem many when set against the magnitude of the goal: to shift something to a higher level that seems stuck at a lower one. Maybe (as I tend to think) responsibility for reaching the goal cannot be separated from responsibility towards the people who may reach it, the writers and readers of *FLM*.

Two matters concern me particularly and I raise them to see what others think and what suggestions they might make. One concerns the extent, and kind, of revision that might be applied to articles. It would seem desirable that authors should be helped to make their written case in the best possible way. But it is not always clear what “best possible” means, and I find that suggestions for extensive revisions are usually met by silence. (Perhaps the writers immediately send the articles elsewhere.) Some articles are too long, some too opaque, some too boring. I am torn between responsibility to the readers and responsibility to the writer; my inclination is to hope that the author knows best, better than me or my advisors, what he or she wants to say.

The second matter is the encouragement of “new” writers, and of “old” writers who want to publish only full-fledged articles. The better (in whatever sense) the articles that *FLM* publishes, the more difficult it seems to break the mould, to make it clear that there is space for partial, concise, unpolished communications as well as space for articles of a traditional sort. Dick Tahta refers elsewhere to the problem. Can *no one* solve it?