

Reflections on FLM

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It is, it seems, a period for heightened sensitivity to the measurement of time. The millennium looms, Generation-X ages, and our ever more nimble electronic devices continue their assault on the healthy pauses inherent in civilized discourse. The most popular of landmarks is, it seems, the fiftieth. Some five decades after the decisive events of World War II, war-brides and grooms celebrate golden anniversaries and their older progeny somewhat warily acknowledge entry into their second half century. *For the Learning of Mathematics* is soon to join this somewhat unusual set, recording not half a hundred years, but rather, issues. Its founding editor and guiding spirit since its inception, David Wheeler, has decided that this is an appropriate time to pass his responsibilities on to a new generation. In a letter to members of the advisory board, formally advising us of this decision, and noting in passing that it was fifty years ago that he was first awarded a teaching certificate, David suggested that some of us might like to share a few comments about what we have seen as special features of the journal. This is one response to that invitation.

This is, for a number of reasons, not an easy task. It has not been facilitated by the characteristically stern admonition from our leader that any temptation in the direction of the "self-congratulatory, hagiographic, or otherwise delusional" is to be fiercely resisted. It would then be poor form to embarrass our dear friend by claiming that *FLM* has been, to an extent seldom seen in the contemporary world of academic journals, a reflection of the taste, discipline, intelligence, and editing skills of a single individual, a certain D. H. Wheeler. So, pliable and obedient board member that I have been over the past sixteen years, let me not take that route, but point rather to two other aspects of *FLM* that have loomed large for this reader. The first is the extent to which it has been for me a quintessentially Canadian publication in the best possible sense of that term. Partly that has been because of geography. The journal was born in the bilingual richness of Montreal (subliminally, I suspect that the real meaning of *FLM* is *Front for the Liberation of Mathematics*) and then, like many other institutions and individuals, succumbed to the siren call of mellower British Columbia. More importantly, however, are its close links with one of David Wheeler's other legacies, the Canadian Mathematics Education Study Group (*Groupe canadien d'étude en didactique des mathématiques*) the small but vital organization which he was instrumental in creating in the late 1970s. The practice from the beginning of that Group has been to have an annual five-day meeting to which two distinguished speakers from outside Canada are invited. Typically, one of these has come from the field of mathematics education and the other from another discipline, usually mathematics, but sometimes philosophy. (Jeremy Kilpatrick once wryly noted our somewhat ambiguous tendency to refer to the non-math educator as

"the speaker who is out of it"). David was always very clear about the fact that there was to be no automatic assumption that CMESG plenary talks would become *FLM* papers, but many of them did and it is some of those papers which are the ones I remember with special affection. One reason for this would seem to be a sort of "layering" or multidimensionality at work. Sometimes the speakers would be individuals I had known or worked with previously and so the sequence of prior knowledge, oral presentation, and reworked published paper might be particularly rich. This was the case with the presentations by Peter Hilton (*Current Trends in Mathematics and Future Trends in Mathematics Education* 4 (1)) and Stephen Brown (*The Logic of Problem Generation* 4 (1)) at Vancouver in 1983, Jeremy Kilpatrick (*The Reasonable Ineffectiveness of Research in Mathematics Education* 2 (2)) in Edmonton in 1981, and Alan Bishop (*The Social Construction of Meaning* 5(1)) at Waterloo in 1984. On other occasions I did not have any prior expectations of the speakers but interacted with them in my role as local organizer for the meetings. I have particularly vivid memories of the presentations of Joseph Agassi (*On Mathematics Education: the Lakatosian Revolution* 1 (1)), Philip Davis (*Towards a Philosophy of Computation* 3 (1)) and Gerard Vergnaud (*Cognitive and Developmental Psychology in Mathematics Education* 3 (2)) from meetings held in Kingston in 1979 and 1982. The 1979 lecture of the Israeli philosopher of science, Joseph Agassi, was especially memorable. Bobbing and weaving around the ideas of his former fellow student at the London School of Economics, Imre Lakatos, Agassi was witty, provocative, aggressive, and charming. Our editor must have been moved by it too: thirteen months later the published paper appeared under the name of (one of my favourite Freudian slips of all time!), "Joseph Agass!"

The other unique feature of *FLM* for me has been the extent to which it exemplifies what I would like mathematics education to be. I have always found the inside front-cover proclamation of the journal's aims ("... to stimulate reflection on and study of") to be a succinct and graceful statement. There is an elegance and coherence in the design and physical composition of the journal which is rare. All too often contemporary journals seem almost like random collections of articles of quite mixed quality many of which would seem to have been generated by a "publish or perish" mentality. In June of 1984 (Volume 4, Number 2) David wrote in an editorial, "since there are so many journals concerned with mathematics education ... it seems natural to seek to make some special claim for *FLM* that would give it a small but special piece of the action" [p 24]. Thirteen years later this reader can report that for him, *FLM* has, in fact, had quite a large piece of the action. I suspect that I am not alone in finding this.