

Looking Back: Wondering Forward

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It is an honour to share selected reflections on my eight years as editor of the *Alberta Journal of Educational Research (AJER)*. When I took on the role of editor, I could not have imagined the changes that have occurred in that time, and some associated challenges.

Over the eight-year period *AJER* has undergone substantial changes. Major amongst these were the move from being a paper-based journal to an online journal, the dissolution of the Editorial Advisory Board and its replacement with a fully populated Editorial Review Board, and the move to engage graduate students in the production process of the journal as copyeditors. When I began as editor the move to an online format was already well underway through the leadership of then editor, Professor Larry Prochner. Along with this move to 'online' has been a more recent shift of the moving subscriber access wall from two years to one, to reflect changes in the publishing responsibilities of authors publishing from their Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded research. The transition was remarkably smooth and, in general, these moves have resulted in positive outcomes for the journal. These include an increasingly wide readership, an increase in the number of submissions (from an increasingly wide range of authors and countries), and an increased efficiency in submission, review, and production processes. Through these shifts, *AJER* has maintained its reputation as a high quality, eclectic, and affordable journal. These have been positives for the journal.

However, of course, there have been challenges. I wrote in Vol. 57, No. 1, Spring 2011 (Thomas, 2011) that "recent times have witnessed a marked increase in the number of journals in educational research." This trend has continued at a rapid pace. The majority of new journals are online. Some attend to fields of education that are emerging, or fields where authors are seeking to establish very focused outlets for their scholarship. Other journals attend to specific regional orientations. Most are bona fide, seeking like *AJER* to publish "original, high-quality research and scholarship in the field of education that has been subject to stringent peer-review" (Thomas, 2011). However, there has also been a marked rise in what have become known as 'Predatory Journals.' These journals are often characterized by limited, if any, qualified peer-review processes, unimaginably fast review and publication times, and, most notably, author fees to publish. Let me be clear that these three factors most often 'cluster' together in the case of such journals. There are of course bona fide journals that charge authors publication fees, and this is not a new practice. What characterizes the predatory journal is the general lack of quality peer review, and the very short times from submission to publication. Most established and experienced authors can (a) recognize such journals, (b) know to steer clear of their requests for submissions and the inevitable promise of speedy publication, and (c) provide advice to those in their communities including emerging scholars to be careful about publishing options. However, the emergence and increasingly visibility and influence of such journals has occurred because of the pressure exerted on many if not most academics to 'publish or perish' and the often-enticing

messages from such journals that arrive in our email inboxes almost daily.

The consequences of the emergence of such journals are several. There has definitely been a dilution of quality in educational publishing. Without rigorous peer review it is nigh impossible to maintain quality. Also, articles from such journals have started to appear in the reference lists of some submissions to *AJER* and other journals. This has now created a new onus on editors and reviewers; to check reference lists more carefully and certainly not accept on face value the citations used in submissions to support an author's contentions. As an editor, it has now become essential to review reference lists and often to read papers that appear in them, to check the quality of the referential literature support. This was not as necessary in the past. I anticipate that these 'predatory journals' will thrive even more in the 'need to publish' world of most academics, and therefore intensify the pressure on editors and reviewers to maintain quality.

Over the last eight years I also note an increase in the view that the findings from publicly funded research and scholarship should be available to everyone, and at a lower cost if not free. People seem to often associate 'online' with 'free.' Nothing could be further from the truth in journal publishing. There is always a cost to someone or some organization for a journal's publication, whether it be in time, money, or both. In the case of *AJER* we are grateful for the support of SSHRC and the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. Without their financial and technical support, the future of *AJER* might have been quite grim, even with subscriptions. Journals have always operated because of the support and goodwill of many people, and this situation will not change. Reviewers, especially, give up considerable time to review papers; time that could often be 'differently' and maybe more productively spent. Often this time, given freely, goes unnoticed by others. A further consequence of the increasing number of journals is an increasing number of reviews that need to be done by faculty 'at no charge' to publishers. There has also been a marked decrease in the time reviewers are given for review which has further increased pressure on them. So, there is no such thing as a no cost, free journal; journals always cost somebody something and this needs to be recognized across funding bodies, associations, faculties, and individual scholars.

I wrote in Vol. 57, No. 1, Spring 2011, "It is hard to predict what the future holds for academic publishing." This uncertainty has not abated. Some things, however, remain certain: There will be academic publishing; independently owned and operated journals like *AJER* still have an important and valuable role to play, and for an increasingly broad range of scholars and audiences; and the often 'invisible' but essential efforts and expertise of many such as reviewers, copyeditors, the editor's assistant will continue to be required. It is not possible to offer a journal without the contributions of many.

In closing, I would like to thank the wonderful editorial review board of *AJER* for their support over my time as editor. I would also like to acknowledge and thank Deb Mallett and Leah Spencer, the *AJER* editor's assistants in my time as editor for their work with the journal in many diverse and essential roles, and especially for being the primary contacts for 'all things' to do with the journal and its day-to-day operations. I wish Professor Anna Kirova much success in her role as editor, and wish all associated with *AJER* all the best for their futures.

References

Thomas, G. P. (2011). Editor's note. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 57(1), i-ii.
