

Upon Reflection: Being a Journal Editor

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For my last Editor's Column, it seems appropriate to engage in some self-reflection on the experience of having been a journal editor for the last 4 years and what I learned about the role and myself in the process. Hopefully, my comments will prove insightful for anyone considering taking on such a role for one of our professional journals in the future. Obviously, everyone's experience is different and mine is definitely colored by the extensive changes that took place during my tenure with *LL&M*, moving to the more flexible content model and the electronic-only, open-access platform with in-house copy editing. I feel comfortable saying that my Co-Editor, Wendi Arant Kaspar, found the experience highly rewarding and has in fact already signed on to a 3-year term as Co-Editor of another prestigious journal in the field. My feelings are bit more mixed and while I feel the experience was a valuable one and I hope I did well by the journal and *LLAMA*, I think it unlikely that I will embark on a similar undertaking in the future.

Becoming an Editor or Co-Editor

For those not familiar with the process of becoming an editor, different journals will have different processes to identifying and selecting an editor. In some cases, there is a deliberate succession planning model where future editors are groomed by an outgoing editor or are selected from the membership of the Editorial Board or cadre of manuscript reviewers. In other cases, more typical of ALA division level journals, there is an open call to the division membership and an application review process in selecting the next editor. Of course experience as a peer reviewer or having sat on an editorial board or publications committee will help but are not essential criteria. Similarly, some models allow for a gradual transition providing a sense of continuity, as I had with the two years as Co-Associate Editor followed by the two years as Co-Editor of *LL&M*. Other journals, particularly those put out by commercial publishers, will have more abrupt transitions with a clean break as one editor leaves and another comes on board.

Along a similar line, publishers, or in the case of ALA, division Executive Directors or Boards, may have varying concerns about a single editor or co-editor model. The co-editor model definitely allows for easier workload distribution and if one editor encounters a personal crisis, the other is there to pick up the load to get the issue out on time. But there is also a worse case scenario where the Co-Editors become immersed in personal conflict and the relationship becomes competitive. This can be detrimental to the journal as the editors pull the journal in different directions or engage in finger pointing on problems, such as missed deadlines. Unlike co-authorship on a single project or publication where there is a finite end to collaboration and authors can compartmentalize their contributions, co-editorship has a longer, defined timeline

and requires the individuals to repeatedly work closely together on a regular basis. In my case, when Wendi and I decided to apply to LLAMA as Co-Editors for *LL&M*, we had been colleagues at the same institution for over ten years with a strong history of working together. We had guest edited a special issue/monograph together, co-authored several articles, and worked together both as peers and in a hierarchical supervisory relationship for a period. Through it all, our friendship had remained intact and we pretty much knew each other's strengths and idiosyncrasies. Even with this extensive background, I know there were times my conservative approach in looking at submittals and more pragmatic attitude toward technology, with its emphasis on sustainability, made her roll her eyes and put constraints on the vision she had for the journal. Thankfully though, it was a very successful collaboration and we feel that we came out of the experience with the respect of our peers in LLAMA and our friendship as strong as ever.

What I Learned About Myself

There were several aspects of being an editor that surprised me and led me to learn more about myself and my scholarship preferences. First and foremost, I was surprised at how much conflict an editor is expected to mediate. One normally does not think of the role of editor as conflict manager, yet in fact one navigates a range of conflicts with every issue. First and foremost is the conflict that comes in dealing with authors who have sent their precious child for you to show the world. Many have put their heart and soul and ethics into the manuscript and explaining how it is not ready for publication can be tricky. In a best case scenario, the manuscript has a good core and one can make suggestions to develop it to a greater potential. In other cases where the manuscript is just off topic for the journal, one can suggest a more appropriate venue. Unfortunately, some manuscripts have so little substance or are so poorly written that one cannot find any redeeming potential as a publishable work. In this case, one falls back on professional distance in delivering the unwelcome news. Another conflict which editors face is when peer reviewers come back with strongly differing opinions and one must craft together a cohesive response to the author that finds a common ground.

I also gained a new appreciation for the unpredictability of the editing process. Let me open by saying that I feel that I do have strong crisis management skills and am able to ramp up in an emergency as evidenced by an incident a few years ago where a student was bitten by a migratory bat in the library. That said, I am by preference a planner who likes to have things laid out with details defined considerably ahead of deadlines. My Co-Editor and past co-authors might even suggest I have a few "control" issues and I could not deny it in good conscience. As an editor, I came to realize that because of the dependency on submissions coming from outside parties, being able to plan in advance was something of an illusion. At best we would have content laid out an issue or two ahead and more likely were having manuscripts in the editorial feedback/rewrite pipeline and hoping they would come in by the deadlines. While some individuals thrive in this sort of agile environment, it was not a comfortable one for me personally.

One last thing that surprised me was the extent to which my own personal research and publication activities were sidelined, particularly during the period of being Co-Editor. I feel part

of this was due to the workload, but there was also an ethics-centered aspect of the issue that came with the editor responsibilities. From the workload side, editing a journal with a regular publication cycle is very interruptive. One is dealing with steady traffic of receiving and handling manuscripts coming in and being put through the appropriate review process and then either providing editorial feedback to the author or combining feedback from the blind review process or reviewing revised versions. Few manuscripts were received in publication ready format and some required 2-3 iterations of editing feedback and submitted revisions. For some of these, the editorial role was one that more resembled mentoring, requiring a significant investment of time and energy. For others, the demands came from mediating the peer review process. This made it difficult to gather the chunks of time needed to work on a substantive manuscript of my own creation. It surprised me how much I missed the creation part of the research and writing process. Another factor I encountered that I call an 'ethical dilemma' was venue limitations. One of the things that probably helped me get the editorship was having actually been published in *LL&M*. However, for ethical reasons, I did not feel right submitting to the journal where I was editor even though I could have used the blind review process. By personally declaring it "off-limits," so to speak, the opportunities to publish on my area of specialization, management topics, to my preferred audience was significantly reduced. And it just felt wrong to be sending my work to a 'competing' journal by another publisher, given my affiliation. Recently, I had a discussion with a colleague who is also an editor and she encountered the same challenge in 'where to publish.'

In Conclusion

So in closing, I have no regrets at having invested the last four years as a professional to edit a high quality journal of our field and bring to the peer community works of thought-provoking insight and practical interest. It has been a valuable learning experience that expanded my personal knowledge and interpersonal connections through the profession, such as when I was recently reviewing the ALA Poster Sessions at Annual Conference and encountered an author. I saw many manuscripts that made me think about things differently. That said, knowing now what I did not know when I first applied, I have reached the conclusion that I much prefer the role of author to that of editor. Fortunately, the incoming editor is going to let me transition back to this role by writing a yet-to-be-named column. This is a personal decision that considers my own personal strengths and writing style. I hope that through this self-reflective closing Editor's Column, it will help others be aware of what becoming an editor involves and if you are a Librarian who prefers the editorial or mentoring role in guiding manuscripts to publication, I encourage you to seek out and apply for the role of journal editor because it can be very rewarding and does provide a valuable service to our profession.

In closing, I wish to send a final thanks to Wendi for her hard work as Co-Editor and wish Beth and Brad the best as they move the journal forward in new directions that they envision.

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