

## Editorial 30(3): Reflections on non-traditional publishing

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The immediate starting point for these reflections was in mid-July 2020, with a brief flurry of emails from several former colleagues in distance education (DE), who are now about 25 to 40 years ago in my personal "timeline". The emails concerned distance educators' response to "... this unique opportunity to take advantage of the current pandemic crisis. ... to show that the education that students are now receiving is not inferior to that which they receive in normal circumstances. In some respects it is - arguably - better."

Further emails touched upon our reactions to some of the media discourse about how Australia's education system was coping with the Covid-19 pandemic, for example as illustrated by items in *The Conversation* about "students-in-melbourne-will-go-back-to-remote-schooling" (Seah, Pearn & Acquaro, 2020), and "coronavirus-quarantine-could-spark-an-online-learning-boom" (Perrotta, 2020). The terms "remote-schooling" and "online-learning-boom" being presented as novel insights were not appreciated by us!

We shared a view of Australia's Covid-19 media discourse as lacking a sense of the place DE has in all sectors of Australian education. Being reminded of common ground from some years ago, I was prompted to reflect upon one very important influence I encountered a few years after joining Murdoch University's External Studies Unit in 1978. This was Charles Wedemeyer's 1981 book, *Learning at the back door: Reflections on non-traditional learning in the lifespan*. Though cited only once in IIER (by Forrester & Parkinson, 2006) Wedemeyer's book is filled with timeless insights, including one in particular that I needed to look up, with reference to recent events, which is in "A personal note", at the book's beginning.

It was perhaps inevitable that my career in the university would align me most comfortably with University Extension (that's where the action was, and generally still is, in extending opportunity to learners most in need) ... (p.xvi)

Take the phrase "extending opportunity to *learners* most in need", and change just one word, to make it "extending opportunity to *authors* most in need", and there you have an exquisite characterisation of the *Issues in Educational Research* academic journal publishing activities that now occupy a good part of my retirement phase. To give a succinct overview and a lead into this Editorial's title, IIER is a small scale, "generalist" journal encompassing all fields of educational research, now in Volume 30. IIER expects to process about 650 submissions and publish about 80 articles in 2020. As has occurred with many other journals, IIER experienced a Covid-19 induced "spike", with 75 submissions in May 2020, up from the usual 50 or so per month (Atkinson, 2020). That was a lot of extra work, so I was particularly responsive to the emails from my former DE colleagues about Covid-19 impacts.

To indicate briefly *how* IIER operates, it is an open access, online only academic journal, conducted entirely by a small number of honorary staff, society sponsored, more or less middle ranking in bibliometrics for educational research journals, and providing free publishing under a *Creative Commons* license. IIER does not have an article submission system; prospective authors communicate to an associate editor, not to a computer program. In the present day context, IIER's work could be characterised as *non-traditional publishing*, to use a term emerging from my re-reading of Wedemeyer (1981). It is in sharp contrast to the publishing model for very many of the world's journals!

However, this reflection seeks to centre not upon publishing, but upon two questions, both Wedemeyer-inspired, that have high importance: "How can we identify *authors most in need*? How can we *extend opportunity*?"

Identifying "authors most in need" starts with their self-identification through submission of an article. With a flow of about 650 submissions expected for IIER in 2020, it is not difficult to discern the authors' needs, and obtain a sense of *a new urgency regarding publishing* (to adopt another Wedemeyer insight, from his chapter 1 title, p.3, again changing just one word). A few anonymised examples of need and urgency were quoted in IIER Editorial 30(2) (Atkinson, 2020), though the diversity in academic research skills and English language expertise is greater than can be indicated by a few quotations. A majority of IIER's prospective authors fit into a diverse category of *non-traditional authors*, comprising authors researching in developing country, non-Western contexts, using English as a foreign language ("EFL authors"), and often also being novice or junior researchers (I concede that *non-traditional authors* is unlikely to become a category utilised in contemporary discourses on academic journal publishing - it is not a complimentary term).

Identifying "authors most in need" does not provide a criterion for acceptance by a journal. It relates to a duty to provide good formative advice; a duty that in IIER's case is undertaken mainly by our associate editors, who prepare about 80-85% of the rejection advice, as only about 15-20% of submissions are sent out to external reviewers. Under time constraints, as outlined in Editorial 30(2) (Atkinson, 2020), very often an editorial reject includes this frequently used paragraph, or similar, in which "brief" actually means "very brief":

We regret that owing to time constraints our editorial staff advice cannot offer a comprehensive description of all the possibilities for improving a submission, to attain publication in IIER or similar international journals. However, we hope that the brief comments below from IIER editorial staff will be helpful.

Nevertheless, identifying "authors most in need" can provide a strategic direction for a journal, a reason for looking more critically at article selection criteria, and at insights into services that journal editorial staff may provide to improve prospects for authors who encounter many rejections and few acceptances. This point links into the second of my questions, "How can we *extend opportunity*?"

Firstly, we could reflect upon how an innovative broadening of article selection criteria can help to extend opportunity. To illustrate with reference to one kind of broadening, IIER Editorial 29(3) (Atkinson, 2019) reflected upon the supporting of career progression as a purpose for research publishing, to serve a link that is so important in academia, between "progressing the careers of authors and educational advancement for the students and communities they represent" (p.iv). The world is awash, even completely overwhelmed, with a flood of "new knowledge", but many countries seem to lack academics whose careers have been advanced to the point at which they can be powerful scholarly influences upon their students, communities and governments. Possession of knowledge and creation of new knowledge are not sufficient to create influence; recognition as a local, national and regional leader (who has published internationally!) is a vital complement.

Another kind of broadening relates to the traditional criteria of "novel findings" and "new knowledge". These are context dependent. Findings that lack novelty in (for example) an Australian context, may have high novelty in (for example) a South-east Asian context. For example, an investigation of the transition from teacher-centred learning to student-centred learning in upper secondary or higher education may lack novelty with reference to one country or regional context, but may show high achievement in novelty with reference to some other country or regional context. The traditional criterion of "significant issues" may also be opened for innovation. IIER Editorial 30(2) (Atkinson, 2020) discussed IIER's evolving perspective:

... the trend with the "significant issues" perspective in IIER's acceptances of articles is towards representing the world's under-represented educational researchers, and under-represented country contexts; a trend that takes IIER towards greater attention to "what we can do for our students and our communities, and others like us", and less attention towards "what methodological or theoretical advances can we offer to the international community of researchers in this specialty". (p.iii)

The recognition of "context and topic *under-represented*" as a contribution towards acceptance is turned around in many of IIER's editorial advice notices, into "context and topic *over-represented* in IIER" as a contribution towards a rejection decision, and one tactic that we have to use, regrettably, to cope with the volume of submissions.

Secondly, we must reflect also on services that journal editorial staff may undertake. To illustrate, one kind of service is especially important for *non-traditional authors*, copy editing. Editorial 29(4) (Atkinson & McBeath, 2019) characterised IIER's approach as "Publishers taking responsibility for copy editing services", arising from a perception of "authors most in need":

Over the years, we have encountered many submissions that could be readily rejected owing to a poor standard of academic English, but if reviewed on the basis of extensive in-house copy editing being available for accepted articles, have much improved prospects for reviewer and journal acceptance. This perspective is one of the two major foundations for IIER's record on inclusivity towards ESL authors (the other is an inclination towards helping to give 'a voice' to countries of origin and contexts that are under-represented in the international literature in educational research). (p.iv)

Another kind of service, also especially important for *non-traditional authors*, is mentoring, identified in Editorial 30(2) (Atkinson, 2020), in a gently diplomatic way, as a "problem theme":

A need to improve the performance and vision of editorial boards and senior academics, which relates to helping beginning or junior researchers to improve their presentation of articles (sometimes we feel that journal editorial staff spend too much time acting as mentors or informal supervisors) (p.4)

I hasten to add that these reflections are not exploring directions that all academic research journals should follow. On the contrary, diversity is to be valued and promoted. Traditional publishing for traditional authors, and non-traditional publishing for non-traditional authors, are to be complementary, stimulatory and inclusive. I endorse the hope expressed by *Times Higher Education* correspondent Phil Emmerson and quoted in IIER Editorial 30(2):

We must also be hyper-attentive to the ways in which structural inequalities in the publishing process play out - whether they be old or new - and find effective ways to alleviate these, particularly as academia and publishing return to normal (whatever that might look like). ... if we work hard to get this right now, then after the crisis we will be left with a publishing system that is kinder, fairer and more open than the one that we started with. And that can only be a good thing. (Emmerson, 2020)

Another perspective upon diversity, which I (and hopefully many others) endorse, seeks greater attention to local needs and relevance in research reporting. For example, Gilbert Nakweya (2020) outlined from an African context a perspective that is relevant for all regions of the world:

Highlighting the benefits of research and publication for university teaching and African students, he [Benjamin Gyampoh] said: "We need to have concepts that benefit from local contexts. We need to have local examples to teach our students. We need to let our students see what happens around us and apply their minds to them ... When lecturers enter the classroom with knowledge and examples with which African students can identify, it makes teaching and learning easier ...."

I may be pushing my luck, but I hope that Charles Wedemeyer would approve my use of *Learning at the back door* as a source of insights for reflections upon contemporary trends in academic journal publishing, with an orientation towards openness, diversity and inclusivity. To further that orientation, I do hope that future editorials will contain a diversity of reflections, from others in IIER's editorial team and Editorial Board, and over time, from surveys of IIER's authors, including those IIER has "declined".

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