PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON EDITING

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Abstract. In this essay Nicholas C. Burbules reviews his experiences and the lessons he learned as editor of *Educational Theory* for more than twenty years, and he explores some of the normative choices that are inevitably made by any editor in carrying out his or her role. Burbules examines the relationship of a journal to its intellectual field; the review process; communications and interactions with authors; the process of editing and revising manuscripts; questions of representativeness in a theoretically pluralistic field; the business of journal publishing; and the dilemmas that confront an editor in terms of his or her own position and identity within a field. In all of these reflections, he examines the ethical and political background of the choices made, and how these in turn reveal deeper assumptions about the nature and purpose of academic publishing. The result is to “lift up the curtain” and reveal how one philosophically reflective and self-questioning editor handled his responsibilities.

Introduction

I was the editor of *Educational Theory* for more than twenty years. Because it is a journal that explores philosophical, moral, and political dimensions of education, it was inevitable — for me at least — that in carrying out the responsibilities of editor I would also be asking these sorts of questions about my own practice. But for reasons that will probably be apparent as you read this essay, it did not seem possible for me to publish these reflections while I was still editor; furthermore, this is the kind of piece that is better savored, I think, with hindsight.

My main purpose here is to lift up the curtain and reveal the processes and dilemmas that confront a philosophically reflective editor of a flagship journal. I think that most people who have not been part of running a journal operate under some misconceptions about this role, its actual (as opposed to perceived) power, and the difficulties and challenges it presents.

In doing this, finally, I hope to illuminate some wider issues about the nature and purpose of academic journals and the journal publishing business more generally. A journal like *Educational Theory* is a kind of mirror, reflecting a field of investigation back to itself; yet it is not a mirror without flaws and, some might say, distortions. The particular way in which a journal reflects an intellectual field back to itself depends on a range of judgments that editors make in their daily decision making; and these judgments in turn depend on value choices that editors make — must make — in carrying out their duties. Other people, of course, would have made some of those judgments and value choices differently. And yet I believe that there is an exaggerated emphasis on the power and discretion of an editor to shape the content of a journal: as a kind of mirror, its reflective content

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is defined predominantly by the efforts and activities of the scholarly community with which it interacts.

**The Role of a Journal Within Its Field**

My comments here pertain to the kind of journal *Educational Theory* is: a flagship journal within a fairly defined, smallish disciplinary field, affiliated with two professional societies in educational philosophy and theory (The John Dewey Society — which originally established it — and, later, the Philosophy of Education Society). There are other sorts of journals, more generalist in content, that do not correlate in the same way to particular disciplinary fields or societies.

The first, and chief, choice that an editor makes is whether a journal should be primarily concerned with representing the broad variety of approaches, methodologies, and issues that characterize a pluralistic (and in some ways essentially contested) field; or whether a journal should be more prescriptive in promoting those approaches, methodologies, and issues the editor (and editorial board) think have greatest intellectual rigor and value. Of course, every journal only wants to publish the "best quality" work available to it — and this is determined in large measure by the quality of work submitted to it — but judgments of "quality" operate within and across paradigmatic assumptions about the nature and purpose of scholarship itself ... and these too are often contested.

You can begin to see one of several dilemmas I will be exploring in this essay. Choices about featuring or promoting certain approaches, methodologies, and issues means, over time, that a journal’s submissions will be skewed toward work from those orientations. A journal (and an editor) very quickly get a reputation as being hospitable or inhospitable to certain kinds of work, and some authors who take the time to investigate their journal options may then save their own time and effort by sending their work elsewhere. So there is a self-fulfilling prophecy at work, one that can jeopardize a journal’s overall quality by limiting its author pool to the same authors and to variations on the same set of paradigmatic concerns. Such journals can be high in quality, but limited in visibility and impact.

Speaking more broadly, this is certainly a legitimate choice for individual journals. But the sum total of such choices, within a smallish field like ours, could mean that the journal terrain is balkanized, divided up into scholarly subgroups who read and refer to each other intramurally, but not to others across or outside their groups.

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For better or worse, when I became editor I resolved that *Educational Theory* should remain a place where diverse approaches, methodologies, issues, and audiences would potentially engage each other. That reflected, I think, my own pluralistic tendencies, as well as those of my predecessor as editor, Ralph Page; but it also was based on a value judgment about what I thought our own field needed in the early 1990s when I took over the job. The journal had to an extent become a site of sniping and criticism among different philosophical and theoretical groups. As an author, I had even been part of some of that sniping, but that wasn’t the kind of editor I wanted to be. I consciously rewrote the journal masthead and broadened and diversified the associate editors and review board to reflect greater theoretical and disciplinary diversity.

I know this choice has been controversial with some people, who believe the journal should be publishing more work of type X and less work of type Y or Z [but, of course, there are others who are disappointed that we have published too much work of type X, and too little of Y and Z]. I took it as a point of pride when Matthew Hayden found that of the four major journals publishing work in educational philosophy and theory, *Educational Theory* was the least programmatic in tilting toward some approaches and topics rather than others. As you will see, this fundamental decision also tended to drive other decisions I had to make as editor.

But emphasizing the degree to which a journal reflects or represents a field obscures something else that is extremely important: a journal, especially a leading journal, does not only reflect the work being done within a field, but plays an active role in shaping and improving that work. A second principle for me as editor has been that the editorial and review process is not — as it is often assumed to be — only about selection, but also about providing qualitative feedback to authors that helps them improve their work. The final version of an essay in *Educational Theory* has often looked quite different, and in some instances entirely different, from what was first submitted. A broad set of value choices an editor makes revolve around this responsibility: fostering what is in fact a collaborative scholarly community comprising authors, reviewers, and editorial staff, all working together toward the aim of making each article the best version of that article that it can be.

This is the “value added” that differentiates edited journals from open source publishing outlets that allow authors to simply post their work online in whatever state it is. A well-edited journal is not just a medium of dissemination but an active, productive partner in the scholarly process.

**The Review Process**

As just noted, far too much emphasis has been placed on the review process as a means of evaluation and selection. Here I can only tell you how I did things. By and large, I did not need the reviewers to tell me whether an article was publishable, or whether it had the potential to become publishable. Over the years I made many

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“reject” decisions based simply on my own first reading. In a large number of cases this was easy because the essays were simply inappropriate for the journal because they were far outside its mission and editorial scope. (You’d be surprised what some people sent in as submissions. They clearly had never read *Educational Theory*.)

In other cases I had to decide whether to even send out an essay for review, given my desire to avoid burdening the journal’s reviewers with extra work when the outcome was obvious. Yes, their comments might have provided the author with useful feedback, even if it was rejected; but I sent out for review fewer and fewer papers of this sort over the years. The reviewer comments on weaker papers like these were often so scathing (“I wouldn’t accept this from an undergraduate student,” and so on) that it served no good purpose from the standpoint of constructive feedback — and to be blunt some of these papers were so weak or ill-informed that it is not clear what “constructive feedback” might have meant (aside from, “Throw this away and start over again”; or, “Write better”).

Here is the point: in emphasizing the constructive role that journals can play in improving scholarly work, you have to be working with something in the nature of raw material — and you cannot take on the role of reeducating and mentoring people who do not really understand what writing a scholarly article entails. One of the rather dispiriting things you learn as editor (and I read and reviewed over two thousand papers during my tenure) is how much work of that sort there is being done. Having said that, I strongly believe it is part of the role of a journal to provide feedback and advice, especially to newer scholars who are still trying to develop an argument, a voice, and a distinctive, worthwhile point of view. Navigating amid these considerations entails a wide range of choices.

First, it is a prime reason why I would send some things out for review even if I thought they were seriously flawed. Here the reviewers can play a crucial role in helping to identify the potential in a submission and a possible path toward preserving and building on that valuable core. I do not need the reviewers to tell me it is flawed; but I do need them to draw from the relevant literatures and perspectives in areas that I may be less engaged with and to show potential linkages that could help the author develop those core ideas further. The final decision might still be a rejection, but a more encouraging and constructive sort of rejection.

Second, this affected the kind of people I chose as reviewers and associate editors. You want people with the highest standards and rigorous critical capacities, but you also want people who can be sensitive and generous in how they express criticism. You want people who are well-grounded in specific theoretical literatures, but you don’t want people who are true believers who can only see issues through their own particular lens. For me, I had to pick people I respected highly, because I believed that their stature and credibility transferred to the stature and credibility of the journal.

We identified three reviewers for each manuscript. My general trend was to pick a reviewer who I thought broadly shared the theoretical approach or methodology of a submission; a reviewer I thought likely to be skeptical; and a reviewer I thought of as the journal “everyman” (or -woman) — someone with
no particular stake in the paradigmatic fight, but representing the hypothetical reader who might pick up an article and try to make sense of what was going on in somebody else’s domain. Because my main need was not primarily for a publish/don’t publish recommendation — and because it wasn’t a vote in any case, but a matter of feedback and advice to me in making a final decision — I felt that this range of internal and external, friendly and skeptical, perspectives gave the authors a broader range of feedback toward how to improve their work so that it could better reach the journal’s audience(s).

I know this was a controversial decision for some authors: “Well, reviewer C was obviously unsympathetic to the kind of scholarship I do,” or “This reviewer clearly didn’t know the literature in my field, and so misunderstood me.” I can now say, as an ex-editor, that I was always a little suspicious of authorial claims that they were misunderstood. On the one hand, we all know that this is a classic approach for academics in deflecting criticism (“If you think I am wrong, you must have misunderstood me”); on the other hand, I believe, even if something is misunderstood, it is usually a sign that the author needs to express his or her ideas more effectively. The reviewers I invited to work with the journal were thoughtful people, not doctrinaire, usually bending over backwards to be fair to an article on its own terms. If after all that, the point of an article did not come through, or if the reviewers found it unconvincing, my general tendency was to see the fault in the article, not the reviewer. As writers, we can almost always benefit from feedback that shows how we can make our points more effectively and clearly.

Moreover, given the purpose of a journal that is trying to represent the pluralism of a field and to create a forum where diverse approaches can engage one another, it is important, I believe, for authors to consider how their work will be received by people who do not share the same theoretical approach or methodology they do. I had a prominent author once tell me, “I don’t care if others understand me. I know who I am writing for, and they will understand me.” Now, for an individual author this is a legitimate attitude; but for an editor it is problematic. There may be a niche for an article that will only be read and appreciated by a handful of readers, but given a journal’s finite space, it is difficult to devote pages to an article that revels in its appeal to a niche audience. In this case, too, my own values came into play: I wanted that piece to gain a wider readership, I thought it was important and innovative in its claims. And so I did try to get the author to make the piece more accessible to others, without losing or compromising what she was trying to do. After all, every journal article assumes something in its readers, some background and understanding — especially articles in philosophy and theory. But when does the use of specialized phrasing and vocabulary, or references to authors who are not widely discussed in the field, create barriers to understanding where an article could instead create bridges, bringing those ideas into wider circulation instead of making them a qualifying hurdle that readers have to get across before they can make sense of an article?

And so I wanted authors to see what those outside the cognoscenti thought about their work. You can also see in this my own effort to show that people can
have meaningful and constructive discussions across paradigmatic differences. I have long believed that the strong claim of paradigmatic incommensurability is often exaggerated and misunderstood as a claim about mutual incomprehensibility, which I do not think was what Thomas Kuhn thought or what he was trying to argue.\textsuperscript{4} I have approached editing as I approach my teaching, with an insistence that we can learn from both internal and external criticisms — and that we learn different things from each, to our benefit.

The incommensurabilist view also leads, potentially, to a reductio ad absurdum: that only people who share one’s theoretical approach or method, or only people who share one’s identity position, should be allowed to review one’s work.\textsuperscript{5} But if one assumes, as I do, that the review process is not a vote but a process of providing diverse and constructive feedback, then representativeness is not a value consideration and could actually be a drawback. Moreover, the representativeness argument quickly dissolves into an unworkable mess — since it also implies that the editor, the copyeditor, and everyone else involved with deciding and then processing a manuscript must also come from a particular identity category and/or point of view.

Writing a Decision Letter

One of the things you learn as an editor is a plethora of ways of saying no. Presidential candidate Walter Mondale said in 1984 that the essence of leadership was being able to say yes, and no … “but mostly no.” That’s the life of a journal editor for a journal with a high rejection rate: you are usually saying no, and much of the time saying no to people who are not happy with the decision and who may think the decision is unfair. So how do you say no to people?

One aspect is to rely on a process that is objective and fair — and perceived to be so. Anonymous reviewing (I stopped saying “blind reviewing” years ago when I was told it was ableist) is a key part of perceived fairness. The independent judgments of colleagues provide buttressing to the editor’s decision, and that is why we almost always shared copies of the reviewer comments with the author.

Language that is balanced and respectful can help to tone down the pain of an unfavorable decision. At a more nuanced level, there are encouraging “no’s.” If you assume that a central function is to mentor and encourage newer scholars, you try to find what is positive in a piece. In some cases a negative decision may still result in an invitation to revise and resubmit. In other cases you might encourage the author to send the piece elsewhere, perhaps to a different journal (or, sometimes, frankly, a journal with lower acceptance standards). Sometimes you are trying to “frame” the reviewer comments, which are critical, by trying to highlight their helpful and constructive suggestions. Sometimes you can help an author identify


the article he or she wanted to write (or should have written) instead of the one the author did write. And you can make it clear whether you are encouraging the author to consider submitting the new version to your journal.

But writing acceptance letters is no less prone to pitfalls, though it is generally more enjoyable to do. In more than twenty years (and something in the range of 600 published papers), I think every single one went through the phase of “conditional acceptance,” that is, committing to publication only on the condition that additional changes and improvements be made. The “conditional” part is your only leverage in getting the author to make the changes that you and the reviewers think need to be addressed. Here is where much of the really constructive work of journal editing and reviewing gets done, in terms of improving work and not just selecting good pieces to publish.

One thing you need to be able to do as editor is to read a paper “from the inside.” How can this paper be made a better exploration of the issues it is trying to address? How can this set of arguments be strengthened? How can this rhetorical style say what it wants to say more effectively? Unlike a rejection or a revise and resubmit, if a paper is in the acceptable range, it is already pretty good. But it could always be better. If the reviewer comments have been favorable, an author sometimes thinks, “Well, why do I have to change anything?” Because the submission and review process can take weeks and sometimes even months, authors have sometimes moved on to their next project and are disinclined to put additional time and effort into something they consider to be “done.” A very well-known author once said to me, “The feedback is excellent, and I agree that making these changes would improve the paper. But I don’t want to do it.” Now, what does an editor say to that? I was strongly tempted to say no, but in the end worked out with him what often works out with authors: settling on a subset of changes they are willing to make, even if they won’t do everything we think they should. Certainly there is no guarantee that we are right and the author is wrong, either. In the end, an editor needs to keep in mind that it is the author’s paper, and that in most cases, at least, no one has a greater interest in seeing it improved than the author. Yet it is discouraging when authors don’t look at things that way.

Sidebar: The Question of Length

One of the most delicate issues involved in dealing with authors is the question of length. Because space in a physical (not online) journal is finite, publishing one paper, say, which is double the usual article length means that one more deserving paper may not be published, or will be pushed back an issue. Authors invariably feel that every word they have written is precious; after all, they would not have written the material if they did not think it was necessary for their argument. Yet it is a rare piece, I have found (including my own writing), that cannot be improved by being made more concise and focused, or shortened in some respects so that other sections might be expanded. (As the old quip goes, “If I had more time, I would have made it shorter.”) Because our work in philosophy and theory is holographic, any piece of a study could be expanded substantially on its own. But you cannot explore or develop all such threads. Issues are highly interdependent, and related issues
are often important and relevant. But clearly not everything that is important and relevant can be addressed in each piece. Hence, one of the hardest choices we face in any writing project is what we choose not to write about; what we leave out.

For all of these reasons, it is important to have a maximum length requirement for a journal and to try very hard to get authors to stick to it. There are always exceptions, but in framing them as exceptions, an editor then has the leverage to put the burden of proof on every page that goes beyond the length requirement: Do you really need to get into this? Is there a more concise way to say that? Is this section perhaps a separate paper in itself, that needs further development beyond what you can manage here? Sometimes isn’t it better to say nothing than to say too little?

There is a related issue, which I dealt with on a few occasions over the years: accepting for review a project that by its very nature could not be managed within our page constraints. Here the issue is not one of conciseness or rewriting, or trimming a paragraph here and there. It is that the project in its scope, complexity, or historical sweep requires substantial length. I always suspected that the shortish length requirement of this journal emerged from a period where more analytical writing predominated — a kind of philosophy where you get in, do some concept sharpening and clarification, then get out. So I realized that length requirements, if one was too rigid about them, could actually effect a bias against certain ways of doing philosophy or theory that require some degree of expansiveness.

What makes this complicated in the particular, though, is when you are dealing with an author who is defensive about any substantial changes — or even worse, cuts — to his or her prose. The claim of methodological necessity, which often overlaps with certain claims about style or “voice,” can make for a handy excuse not to accept any substantial changes at all. I do not believe that there is any project that cannot be improved by an outside perspective questioning what the author thinks is absolutely essential to his or her meaning and purpose. But this policy has resulted in some of the testiest exchanges I have had with authors.

Editing Manuscripts

For the first ten years or so of my editorship, I did extensive copyediting of every manuscript myself. I had a copy editor who was very good but did not feel comfortable dealing with issues of content. And in our field, how do you keep issues of expression and style entirely separate from issues of strength, clarity, and substance of argument? Given the proviso that all changes are advisory to the author, and that in cases of irreconcilable disagreement we would go with the author’s preferences, therefore, I sometimes made extensive changes to texts: crossing out entire pages, rewriting sentences and even full paragraphs, and in some cases suggesting new material that I thought strengthened or clarified the case the author was trying to make. Was this excessive? Was it blurring the roles of editor and co-author? (I have been listed as co-author on papers to which I have contributed less.) It probably is not a surprise that, given my view that the role of the journal review and editing process is to improve the quality of work, I saw the editorial
role as active and collaborative. But I recognize that other editors would not do this and that some readers will perceive this as beyond an editor’s proper role. My question was always: Did this improve the author’s project, that is, did it help this person’s paper achieve its purpose [not mine]?

The editor, in my view, has to keep two perspectives in mind: the author’s and the hypothetical audience’s [indeed, multiple audiences’]. The work is the author’s, and there are certainly considerations of voice and style that are very personal matters for authors, about which they might have strong feelings. Most of us academics consider ourselves to be good writers (perhaps better writers than we actually are), and the choices we make about how to express our ideas are sometimes driven by very conscious decisions and, inseparable from that, theoretical or paradigmatic commitments that interweave issues of form and content, style and substance. We struggle, sometimes tortuously, to find a way to say what we are trying to say — or to figure out what we are trying to say by writing about it.

This complex picture can be complicated even further by aspects of cultural or linguistic habit, especially for an English-language journal that publishes many authors in their second language. I remember in graduate school, when I was a teaching assistant, marking up the papers of international students — in the first example that comes to mind, students from Latin America — who rebelled against some of my comments: “You want us to write Anglo! You want short, declarative sentences, and we prefer longer sentences with multiple dependent clauses, a greater play with words. What you call ‘good writing’ is really just a kind of cultural imperialism.”

That stung, and you can tell I still haven’t fully gotten over it! Nor is it necessarily true that good writing in English requires short, declarative sentences: William Faulkner or Henry James offer prime counterexamples — as does, for that matter, John Dewey. My predecessor as editor of *Educational Theory*, Ralph Page [from whom I learned so much], had a strong policy of deferring to the author’s preferred way of saying things [short of outright grammatical errors — and even then, there were borderline instances]. His line to me was, “The author has the right to be wrong.” And I have already discussed the importance of viewing a project from the inside and trying to help it be the best project of that type that it wants to be.

But there is a second principle, a respect for the audience[s] of a journal and what will communicate to them; what they will have the patience to struggle through, or not, in order to extract meaning from an article. And this principle drove my editorial policy in the direction of revision for the sake of clarity and explicitness. I earlier mentioned the case of an author who rejected this as a general desideratum: she knew who she was writing for and they would understand. The general journal readership was not a concern for her. Moreover, some authors have claimed that even the values of clarity and explicitness are restrictive, inhibiting their ability to write obliquely, to suggest, to meander around ideas in an exploratory way, to form new coinages and linguistic constructions that are not
clear because they are experimental, new, or counterhegemonic. They resist the very model of academic writing as a series of explicit claims and formal arguments, and they reject the criterion of audience-friendly writing as a general good.

These are certainly legitimate issues to raise, and for obvious reasons they are more likely to arise in a journal devoted to issues of philosophy and theory. We published many papers of this sort over the years. But the honest truth is that I often viewed these arguments skeptically. When you have read a couple of thousand papers with an editorial eye, you begin to believe that you can tell the difference between writing that truly is “experimental” and “new,” and writing that is simply confused; between writing that tries to be as complex as the ideas it is trying to express, and writing that is awkward, unwieldy; between writing that sounds good to the author’s ear, but not to anyone else’s. For me, that is where the audience’s interests, and the interests of the journal generally in being regarded as readable and accessible, trump the preferences of the author to simply say what he or she wants to say in whatever way he or she wants to say it.

But I have to add that these moments also caused some of my greatest moments of self-doubt as an editor. Certainly, I have my blind spots. What if I (and the reviewers) were simply not getting it? What if we were missing something [or messing with something] that was potentially transformative, something brilliant? Don’t those sorts of pieces often run up against conventional discourses and ways of thinking? Even worse, was I using the position of editor to coerce people into abandoning or changing parts of who they were, as expressed in what they wrote?

I do not want to exaggerate this issue: most authors were more than willing to make or accept revisions, and in the overwhelming majority of cases they said, sometimes publicly in their acknowledgments, that they appreciated the input of reviewers and the quality of editorial revisions — and believed that their work had greatly benefited from them. But the few cases that were contested over the years were some of the most difficult for me, and those disagreements sometimes resulted in an article not appearing in the journal at all [either because of the author’s own choice, or ours]. Those cases feel like failures to me. Certainly, this is the area that had the greatest moral ambiguity for me as an editor: how much to trust my own expertise and experience in judging what works and what does not work in academic writing, weighed against the author’s insistence that his or her work should be respected just as it is.

Representativeness in the Journal

I have already talked about the two-sided question of whether a journal should reflect a field back to itself, or prescriptively represent a normative ideal of the field, in relation to the content of articles. Another aspect of this question relates to authorship. For a flagship journal related to a diverse and international professional field, there are dangers if the journal has conspicuously underrepresentative numbers of authors from certain demographic categories [including gender and ethnicity, among others]; from theoretical or disciplinary orientations; from regional or national locations; and so on. I learned with difficulty very early on that people notice these things, and that some people count. I was a very new editor when
the journal (and by extension, I) was criticized in print for having insufficient numbers of female authors. The danger of such perceptions is that they become self-fulfilling. If a journal (or editor) gets the reputation for being unreceptive to work from group A or B, or from theoretical orientation C — whether this is a fair perception or not — authors from those groups will often react by submitting their work to other journals … and then, indeed, their work will be underrepresented.

Now, the fact is that editors have less control over these numbers than people think. You do not control what gets submitted, and while you can actively solicit work from people or on topics you want to see better represented in the journal, through commissioned pieces or special issues, that too can create difficulties if you are still going to run those papers through a rigorous review process that might end up rejecting them, or at least asking them for substantial revisions. If you run too many special issues, that can make you look less selective, and it fills journal space that makes it even harder for ordinarily submitted work to find a spot. Here, as in other circumstances, the position of journal editor is far less determinative than people perceive it to be; much of the time you are balancing or coping with difficult choices not of your making and not entirely within your control.

A different kind of representativeness is the inclusion of authors whose name and stature give the journal (perceived) credibility. If you are not publishing the work of those considered to be leading lights in the field, people will start to wonder why. On the other hand, however, if you are serious about an anonymous review process that deals with authors impartially, then you cannot control what work makes it through the process and what does not. You cannot make a habit of deferring to well-known authors who say, “You can take this article or leave it — it’s of no concern to me. If you don’t publish it, lots of other journals will jump at the chance.” Nor can a serious academic journal make a habit of publishing authors (or topics) just because they are “hot” at the moment. Perceived reputation or stature isn’t necessarily the best guide to who is actually doing the best work — and here, too, an experienced editor views the field in a different way than the average reader does.

*Educational Theory* faces another issue of representativeness. Its association with the Philosophy of Education Society and John Dewey Society gives it a central stake in publishing work in philosophy of education, but not exclusively so. The journal’s name describes a broader editorial scope. But the boundaries between philosophy and other theoretical positions are contested, and often politically contested. Are feminism or critical race theory philosophical positions? Some contributors to this journal would argue forcefully yes, and others equally forcefully no. This contested debate over the nature and boundaries of philosophical thought often aligns with representativeness of other types (for example, authorship); and it is complicated even further during a time when philosophy, like many disciplines, is evolving through a more interdisciplinary phase — the nature and boundaries of any discipline (even philosophy) are historically shifting. For some, however, this is also a controversial claim. It helps that the journal’s name refers to *theory*, and I made a conscious effort as editor to represent theoretical work from a range
of disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches, not only philosophy per se. But that meant that some authors and readers of the journal saw this as a diminishment of the journal in terms of philosophical rigor; or that some reviewers applied the criteria and expectations of what was “philosophical” as a factor in evaluating work that came from other approaches. Conversely, work that was philosophically strong was sometimes criticized by other reviewers for being too acontextual or for not considering the various “isms” of current theories. Given my previous comments, you can see how delicate it can be as an editor not to be seen as tilting too far in one direction or the other of these highly contested disputes.

**The Business of Journal Publishing**

Probably the biggest decision we made during my editorship was the decision to sign a contract with Blackwell Publishing to provide certain services for us, in exchange for a higher subscription rate and shared revenues from that income. We had been approached by many publishers before, but part of what made Blackwell’s offer appealing was that, at the time, two (and, with us, three) of the four leading philosophy of education journals were working with them — opening up a number of possibilities for journal collaboration (though not much of that ever developed). Up until that point *Educational Theory* was independent, with an extremely low subscription price and a small, self-managed publishing operation. Unlike most journals, we were supported by basic operating expenses from the University of Illinois, which owns the journal, and as a result did not need substantial income from our subscriptions. We were in every sense a nonprofit enterprise.

Nevertheless, the agreement with Blackwell was enormously beneficial to us: more than doubling our subscriptions, giving us a much higher international profile, and creating a state-of-the-art web presence. While I am very concerned about the escalating costs of journals, and their effects on academic libraries, we remain very modestly priced compared to other journals in philosophy of education. And the added revenue has allowed us to carry more of our operating expenses at a time when our university support was being cut back. Finally, we were able to establish the Educational Theory Summer Institute, a working-paper conference that supports international groups of scholars in developing special issue projects in collaboration with each other and with faculty and students here at Illinois. These have been extremely productive events, which have extended the journal into new areas, and new authorship. But we could not sponsor these events without the revenue we earn from Blackwell.

The decision to work with Blackwell, and the experience of doing so during a time when the economics (and technology) of academic publishing were being transformed, raised a number of other questions and issues for me. One was how to reconcile an entrepreneurial mindset (even thinking of a journal in terms of “revenue” and “profit”) with the mission of an independent scholarly publication. Is

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6. Interestingly, one consequence of this internationalization was abandoning our description of issues in terms of the seasons (Winter, Spring, Summer, Fall). This designation, we were told, exhibited a hemispheric bias!
it exploitative to think about pricing the journal in relation to “what the market will bear”? Can journals realistically continue to rely on subsidies from universities and professional societies, which protect their scholarly independence? Yet, on the other hand, what choices confront you when you start thinking of your publication in terms of generating revenues?

For example, Blackwell produces an annual report for us that documents the most downloaded (which may or may not indicate the most read) online articles. Initially, I did not want to know these metrics. If, let’s say, we found out that articles on topic X, or from author Y, were most downloaded, would that create an incentive to publish more of that type? From a commercial standpoint, customer preferences are important market data. But from an academic standpoint, these articles may or may not be the most important, or the “best” articles — and publishing more of them, while it may be giving the audience what it wants, is a short road to academic opportunism. If one were publishing a fashion magazine, that attitude would make sense; but for a scholarly journal, it seems crucial to maintain an independent process of evaluation about who and what to publish, even if these articles might be less downloaded than others. [There is also a short-term, long-term consideration here: sometimes the most important and enduring work simply can’t be measured in one-year metrics.]

This topic ventures into the area of online publishing. What has become clear to me is that the biggest consequence of putting articles online is not what it appeared to be at first — namely, digital access to what had been print-only publications. By and large, for this journal and most others of which I am aware, publishing online has in itself had little effect on our processes of solicitation, editorial review, editing, and production (since we do still continue to produce a paper edition). The far greater consequence is the ability now to generate a host of metrics about publication, readership, citation, and (what some call) “impact.” Related to much broader trends in higher education to seek to quantify measures of faculty productivity and quality, digital publishing has generated vast amounts of data that offer the illusion of objective indicators for assessments that, I believe, are still inescapably qualitative. The disproportionate appeal of an apparently objective measure reifies in numbers a seemingly simple decision that does not require time-consuming exercises like, say, actually reading the scholarly work under consideration — a tempting excuse for overworked administrators and review committees who may believe they lack expertise to judge such work for themselves.

Paul Smeyers and I have argued against the larger consequences of such practices and the distorting effect they have on authorial choices, on journal decision making, and on the policies of academic institutions.7 Enhancing your “impact factor” as a goal in itself can lead to gaming the system in all sorts of easily predictable ways, none of which have anything to do with considerations of

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actual quality (quite the contrary, in fact). But the economics of journal production and the Darwinian survival game for individual scholars and academic units within universities — where, for better or worse (mostly worse), these metrics are taking hold — means that it is self-defeating in the long run to ignore these realities or pretend they do not affect other people’s decisions. Yet, at the same time, it is soul-destroying to let them play a defining role in our publishing decisions. How does a journal editor navigate these trade-offs? Do you want to artificially drive up higher rejection rates, which is commonly (and incorrectly) taken as a sign of rigor and quality? Do you want to require authors to cite articles in your journal as a condition of publication (as some journals do), which artificially inflates your citation numbers? Do you choose to publish specific articles, authors, or topics with an eye toward popularity and a larger number of downloads, citations, and the like? I did not do any of those things, but the reality is that an editor who did might have produced a publication that performed better according to certain metrics that many now care about.

**On Being an Editor**

Finally, I want to write a bit about the experience of being a journal editor at the same time that I was carrying on an active scholarly career myself.

First, as a participant at conferences and in other settings, as well as in my writing, I sometimes found myself censoring some of the public comments, especially critical comments, I might have otherwise made about people’s work. As an individual, I am entitled to those views and I am prepared to defend them; but I often worried that others might perceive my comments not as the views of Nick Burbules, but as those of the editor of *Educational Theory*. And if the editor of *Educational Theory* thinks work of type A, or the work of scholar B, is less than competent, how will this affect his judgments in reviewing such work for inclusion in the journal?

Now, I know that others might have been less worried about this than I was, and perhaps my concern was exaggerated. Personally, I did not have trouble keeping these two roles separate, and I understood the difference. But perceptions matter (sometimes they matter too much), and in a field that is somewhat balkanized already, and in which theoretical positions are often imbued with considerable political or normative weight and very strong personal identifications, it seemed to me that my own credibility as someone who could fairly read and evaluate a range of work (even work I might personally disagree with) needed to be protected, for the sake of the journal. But there were times when it felt like ducking the issues.

There are many other ways in which I felt the tensions of maintaining the dual roles of Nick Burbules the colleague and Nick Burbules the journal editor. When someone who had an article in review came up to compliment me or solicit my opinion about something they never seemed to be interested in before, or when I was invited to give a presentation somewhere and then people from that institution or organization submitted a proposal to the journal for a special issue, could I ignore the coincidence? You cannot as an editor ever seem to be in the business of *quid pro quos*, naturally; and here as in every instance, you strive for objectivity and
fairness. You usually say no to authors, as I have said, and with practice you get pretty used to saying no even when you know it will upset and disappoint people. But it isn’t always easy.

A related problem, for a small field like ours, is that you often know more about a submitted author’s situation than you want to. Personal and professional relationships are part of this, and you are sometimes saying no to friends and colleagues — with whatever personal consequences that might have. But even harder is when you know, for example, that a submitted author is a young scholar going up for tenure, in which one more accepted article in a prestigious publication might make the difference between making tenure or not. Should that be a factor in the final decision? For myself, if it was otherwise a borderline call, I might have taken that situation into consideration; but as a general policy it cannot be. Being accepted for publication isn’t a favor you grant people, and it is very dangerous for an editor to see this decision as something they can bestow at will. Nor is it fair that I know author A is in that situation, but author B, whom I do not know, is in that same situation, unbeknownst to me. Should it be a factor for the former but not the latter? Still, we are real people with real relationships and it would be dishonest to say that the decisions we make — and their consequences for others — do not weigh on us. They certainly have on me.

But, having said this, I return to the fact that the role of editor has far fewer degrees of freedom than people imagine. It is not a position of great power personally, though, taken as a whole, the patterns of who gets published and who does not have large intellectual as well as professional consequences. But the decisions an editor makes — the decisions I made — need to be based on a credible review process; on consistent policies and standards; on a general desire to serve authors and support their rights of self-expression; and on one’s best efforts to discern, to foster, to encourage, and in some cases to collaboratively promote the highest degree of excellence that a journal, and the intellectual field it represents, can achieve. What I have tried to do in this reflective essay is to show how complex and difficult it can be to balance all of these considerations, and how their net effect is to make the position of editor feel much less powerful, and more conflicted, on the inside than it might appear from the outside.

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