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Journal Editing in the Age of Open Access: A Reflection on Opportunities and Challenges

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JOURNAL EDITING IN THE AGE OF OPEN ACCESS

A Reflection on Opportunities and Challenges

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"Focus on Assessment" theme issue

With the advent of open access publishing and the press for authors to retain copyright to the work they create, the scholarly community is returning to its roots—information reviewed and disseminated by scholars, for scholars. While most discussion in the literature relates to how open access returns the power to the author, we have found comparatively little discussion on how critical the work of reviewers and editors is to the growth and maintenance of an accessible common space for the presentation of scholarly ideas. As the guest editors of the first theme issue of *CIL*, we thought we'd share some of our observations on our work in what we have come to think of as the “garden of open access,” and what we have learned about the process. Although the responsibilities and challenges of being “in charge” are many, the discoveries and rewards that come from working with an exceptional group of colleagues are worthwhile.

In previous editorials, Stew Brower and Chris Hollister have talked about many of the administrative decisions they have made in establishing *CIL* as an independent, open access publication. We have grouped our observations into three areas: content, publishing decisions and timelines, and collaboration. We hope that this discussion might provide insight and guidance to other journal editors who join us in tending our common garden.

Content recruitment remains the key to a successful publication. In addition to sending out calls for contributions via email distribution lists, newsletters, and the *CIL* web site, we mined conference abstracts for potential contributors, directly contacted professional organizations with publicity materials, and did our best to get the word out about the theme issue. The variety found in this issue was a

conscious editorial decision. We opted to combine invited papers, research studies, and case studies. Because there is no length or format limit as with print journals, we were able to provide access to supplemental material and data that might have been excluded to make the content fit a print format. We introduced the "Perspectives" section, which features invited, editor-juried content from leaders in the field to provide readers new to this area with a solid theoretical foundation. We believe that these perspectives, combined with a range of current research articles and case studies, present a good blend of the practical and the theoretical in the final mix.

An advantage to electronic publishing is the ability to include content that takes full advantage of the born digital format of the journal, such as audio files for interviews or streaming video for examples of online tutorials. While we considered these alternate formats, we found that there were issues that still needed to be resolved and would require a more extensive analysis than our timeframe allowed. Chief among our concerns was how we would preserve the blind peer review process for non-text work. We did not have any submissions that made use of these tools or formats, and we ultimately decided not to include any of these types of work in our invited sections. We did, however, have a number of stimulating discussions on the editorial challenges posed by non-text content. We also considered how the evolving landscape of publishing might impact the future of our content, especially given that the line might eventually blur or disappear between the various types of open access to the literature. At present, "gold" open access journals (which have many different business models that support their publication) and "green" post-print self-archiving options are distinct (Suber 2007) but they might someday give way to hybrid peer-reviewed sections in institutional digital repositories.

We have again been reminded of a particular lesson familiar to everyone who has advised students in the classroom or at the reference desk: Allow more time than you think you

need. Short turn-around times are difficult in any project, and an all-volunteer undertaking presents special challenges. Excellent content is not enough in and of itself—the difficulty is how to make it available without the professional publishing structure built up around the content. This issue goes to press a little later than we had anticipated, in part because everyone has day jobs and there is only so much time available for gardening. Having now seen the complex range of tasks that make up the publication of just one issue of *CIL*, we have greatly increased respect for the coordination it takes to pull everything together on a tight but realistic timeline.

The publishing process looks different when one moves between the vantage points of author, reviewer, and editor. We expected the steady rhythm of editorial responsibilities (soliciting content, assigning reviewers, and overseeing the blend and 'flavor' of the issue.) The surprises came more with the spaces in between, the waiting. Once the manuscripts go out, there is the waiting to hear what the reviewers have to say, and then once their input is gathered and summarized for the authors, there is more waiting to see what the revisions look like when they come back. One saving grace in all of this was having a co-editor. At each stage of the process we were able to touch base, share the load, and share our observations to help make what were, at times, difficult decisions. It capitalized on our individual perspectives and professional experience. This is not to underplay in any way the incredible support we received from our editors-in-chief, Stew and Chris, who were always available to answer our questions and provide guidance as to journal policy. *CIL*'s fine-tuned editorial management tools (and the Open Journal Systems platform in general) facilitated each step of the process.

The tough decisions are part of the job, and it is difficult to decline a manuscript, even when that is unambiguously the best course of action. Rejecting manuscripts is difficult for reviewers and editors, too. Just because something is interesting doesn't necessarily make it appropriate for a given issue or publication, and

just because something isn't new doesn't mean that it's not valuable to the authors' institution. "First have something to say" (Crawford, 2003) remains excellent advice, and we would emphasize that sometimes discerning *where* to say your piece is as important as figuring out *how* to say the ideas you wish to communicate. The most important reason for the success of this endeavor is that Chris and Stew have created a crackerjack team that keeps this modest operation running. Reviewers are really the key to the success of the enterprise. Stew said it best: "Peer review, in the final analysis, makes our product better. Peer review helps our authors with their own professional growth and development, and it makes them better writers." (Brower, 2009) We would add that reviewers also contribute to the professional growth and development of editors. We learned so much from our reviewers about reading abstracts and balancing the need for concise prose with the need to elaborate points that are truly new. We also want to express our gratitude for reviewers who check every citation and reference for correctness in interpretation as well as format. In addition, neither of us will ever again take for granted the artful skills of truly talented copy editors. The greatest reward of having taken on the mantle of editor has been the opportunity to immerse ourselves in the

current work of professionals in our field and to collaborate with so many talented colleagues. "There is no garden without humility," (Austin, 1898, p. 13) and beautiful gardens take a lot of effort. We are grateful for all the help we received along the way.

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