

OPEN FORUM

On Student Journals

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This year marks twenty years of publication of *Folklore Forum*. When it was founded in 1968 no one anticipated that it would still be alive and kicking twenty years later. But ideas, objects, and events are not necessarily bound by the limitations of their creators. Once articulated, manufactured, or enacted, they may have a life seemingly their own—on condition that others choose to adopt, modify, reproduce, or recreate them. Confronted with the fact of the *Forum's* longevity, I am prompted to recollect elements of its history and to muse over its future.

Anyone who has ever read the first chapters of Isaac Asimov's *The Gods Themselves* may understand something about the birth of the *Forum*. I proposed the idea of a student publication at one of the meetings of what was unpoetically called "The Folklore Club" (perhaps the name was appropriate since it was in some sense organized to club the faculty into making some administrative and instructional changes.) Many of those assembled thought it would be a good idea. That good idea would probably have died quietly if Jim Durham hadn't declared that it was something that would never come to pass. It was easy to propose a publication, he said, but when it came down to getting the hard work done, there wouldn't be anyone to do it. That undertaking would require the commitment of a few rather than the approval and good wishes of the many. At that moment, my determination to see the birth of a student periodical crystallized. Nothing so galvanizes

one to action as the charge that it cannot be done. "Of such things, petty annoyances and aimless thrusts, is history made."

Durham was no spoilsport, however. As soon as he realized that a resolve to produce a publication existed, he joined the effort. The title *Folklore Forum* was his suggestion; the subtitle mine. The first issue was eight mimeographed pages. It contained a debate on the kind of study folklore should be, an item on the *Journal of the Folklore Institute* by its editorial assistant, a note on the study of folklore in Japan by the granddaughter of Japan's foremost folklorist, a "Notes for Queries" section, and a list of bibliographies that folklore students had prepared as part of their coursework at the Folklore Institute. This first issue also defined the publication's purpose; it was to be a forum for communication, exchange, debate, and discussion. We did not intend the *Forum* to be a journal for scholarly publication.

Nevertheless, other forces were at work. In our second issue, we published our first article. Lengthy book reviews appeared by the fourth issue. That year an ambitious Bibliographic and Special Series was initiated to publish bibliographies, guides, indexes and collections of essays devoted to particular themes. Our editorial staff increased. Corresponding editors from other folklore programs were recruited. For a time, the *Forum* managed to retain certain of its idiosyncracies. It editorialized, it tried to be provocative, it was responsive and published quickly, and it tried to be amusing. But the forces set in motion were inexorable. The *Forum* soon came to resemble other established folklore journals. Scholarly articles and book reviews increasingly became the central if not sole features. And so it is today—a product of the eternal quest for respectability.

Is a student journal simply a journal that happens to be edited and managed by students? Are its contributors to be exclusively or mainly students? Is it in direct competition with other scholarly journals for articles and subscribers? What kinds of materials should be solicited? Should the journal be refereed and by whom? There are several answers to such questions—answers which depend upon the ways in which a student journal defines its role.

One option is to view a student journal as an exercise. A student journal is students "playing" at writing, editing, and managing a journal. It is not entirely for real, although it is serious training for the real thing. If this is the function of a student journal, then students should participate in every phase of creation and manufacture. Only student papers should be published. Only students should write reviews. Under this model, the articles that are published are largely

term papers written by students which are unlikely to be submitted to or accepted by established scholarly journals.

Another option is to view a student journal as a serious competitor of the established professional journals, although working with a much lower budget. While it may have difficulty attracting the very best pieces of "big name" contributors, it does have a certain moral power to command some contributions from them. Students also have a contribution to make. As they are often the first to experiment with new models and theories, especially those from other fields, their contributions may serve as a barometer of as well as an impetus for future research. Such a student journal might develop a small but significant readership in the scholarly community.

Neither of these options is dismal. A student journal *is* good training. The kinds of problems that are encountered by editors and managers of a student journal are not readily distinguishable from those that are encountered by any other. Nor is it to be assumed that a student journal is always condemned to publish inferior material. The number of times a student journal is cited in the literature would provide some sort of indication of whether it is read and appreciated by the members of the discipline.

While neither prospect is dismal, each is far from idyllic. If a student journal is really conceptualized as a training program, then everyone should have a crack at every position. The entire staff should rotate on a regular basis so that everyone gets to have an opportunity to perform every task. And there should probably be a great deal of faculty advisement, particularly from those that have had journal experience. Circulation is of little concern, for educational experience rather than market success should matter most. Even if it only circulates "in house," it may be considered to have accomplished its goal.

However, if a student journal is attempting to compete with other professional journals, none of the above holds true. The best editors must be appointed and kept in place. But this option invariably leads to a dilemma. This kind of student journal is bound to do someone a disservice. For if an author has a worthy piece, he or she should want it to get the widest and most prestigious circulation. One would only send it to a student journal either because: (1) the piece was poor and had been rejected everywhere else; or (2) the piece was good but the author was simply too shy to submit to a major journal; or (3) the piece was good and it is offered to the student journal as some kind of charitable contribution. In the first instance the author is doing the journal a disservice; in the second case the journal would

probably be doing the author a disservice by publishing it; in the third case it may be that everyone is done a disservice. Authors are publishing in places they would rather not, while the journal and its editors are being patronized.

To date, it would seem that the *Forum* has demonstrated a measure of allegiance to both of the above options. On the one hand, it regards itself as a valuable training experience for graduate students, while on the other, it has endeavored to make a contribution to the larger discourse in the discipline. When I hear talk about changing the *Forum*, it is invariably directed at pursuing the second option more deliberately: spending more money on format, printing, and design so that it can compete with other professional journals on a more equal footing.

It seems to me, however, that there is a third option. It was this option that the *Forum* originally chose to pursue in its earliest issues but which it quickly abandoned. The principle informing this option is simple. Identify a vacuum and expand into it. Identify a publication niche and exploit it. Why attempt to do what ten other journals are already doing? There are things that can be done that are of interest and importance to the discipline *that no other journal is doing*. Identify what these are and create a publication that accomplishes them. Because it will be the only publication of its type, the journal should be able to select the best contributions from a wide range of contributors—from the anonymous to the infamous.

For example, one thing the *Forum* has done that is not characteristic of other journals is article translation. While I would hesitate to make the *Forum* a journal of translated articles, this is a service provided *only* by a student publication. It would suggest that there are yet other services that await a purveyor. There is a need for reporting, analysis and debate of the issues that pertain to the local and national societies, and the discipline as a whole. Perhaps a student journal can explore the possibility of being some kind of news-opinion *magazine* that is devoted to folklore in all its aspects. Humorous and satiric pieces, which find no place in the established journals, might also prove appropriate if they are sharp and proffered in measured doses.

The new links of folklore to private and governmental institutions, the employment of folklorists in the public sector, has changed what folklorists need to read and talk about. Teaching (what academic and public sector folklorists actually do to earn their daily bread), which is only rarely mentioned in our professional discourse, needs to be more formally, publicly, and regularly addressed. The scholarly article

is often not the appropriate vehicle for much of this kind of communication, and the society newsletters have not been entirely successful in creating an arena for this kind of exchange.

The folklore scene is a lot more complex than it was back when the *Forum* was founded. From the point of view of a publication, this is a good thing. Proverbially speaking, there is considerably more grist for the mill, more food for thought. The established journals with their traditional forms and traditional notions of professionalism and propriety have been unable to respond to many of these forces and issues in a timely and meaningful fashion. Perhaps a student publication, employing qualities long associated with the student role—brashness, naïvete, energy, and a demand for novelty—can respond to a changing profession in ways that have been closed to more traditional publications. Perhaps a student journal can become a vehicle for much of what remains unsaid in our discipline. Perhaps a journal like the *Forum* can become the forum that it was meant to be.