

## Taking stock of *ELTED* (A conversation)

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The article ‘Evolving academic journal editorial systems’ by John Adamson and Theron Muller in this volume of *ELTED* prompted us to reflect on how we see *ELTED* editorial practices at this stage in the journal’s development. What follows is the lightly edited transcript of a conversation recorded in December 2008 between Judith Kennedy, founder of the journal and chair of its editorial panel and Richard Smith, secretary of the panel. Ema Ushioda, co-editor (with Judith) of the present issue, also contributed, and facilitated the discussion overall. The following summary of four key issues which can be seen to emerge from the article by Adamson and Muller guided our discussion, although, as the transcript below shows, these issues proved to be so interrelated that we dotted about somewhat between them:

1. Balancing the role between ‘academic gatekeeper’ and ‘mentor’: How do we see our relationship with *ELTED* contributors? Do we see ourselves as apprenticing newcomers into the academic discourse community?
2. As editors, how far should we go in ‘helping’ authors to revise their papers, or in actually ‘rewriting’ for them? How happy are we to tidy up the language?
3. What is our view on the norms of academic writing, discourse or genre which are ‘acceptable’ for *ELTED*. How flexible are we? Do we welcome/encourage papers that do not fit within these academic norms?
4. What are our grounds for rejecting a paper?

EU: The first issue we agreed to consider is how we see our relationship with *ELTED* contributors. Do we see ourselves at all as apprenticing newcomers into the ELT academic community in the kind of way John Adamson and Theron Muller are referring to in their article?

RS: I think one way of addressing this question and some of the other issues, too, is to take stock of where we are from a historical perspective. Maybe our stance has changed over the years since

the journal began in 1995? Judith, do you want to comment on that?

JK: I think there were initially two major drivers behind establishing the journal. First, there were hardly any journals, if any, specifically concerned with ELT teacher education and development. The second driver was we often felt that newcomers to this area didn’t have a venue for their articles. They either had to write a very academic article for submission to *System* or *Applied Linguistics*, for example, which don’t usually have a lot of articles on teacher education. Or there were very practical and popular journals – *The Teacher Trainer*, for example. These weren’t always relevant for the contributors we had in mind who had done some research and so needed a journal which was essentially research-oriented and yet one which spoke to the community of practitioners. So, yes, we did see ourselves originally as trying to provide a space for newcomers to publish in, to encourage them in feeling that publishing a research-based article wasn’t a barrier they would never be able to surmount. Perhaps we tried to be more generous in what we would accept than we would be today, and perhaps gave contributors more help than we would today.

RS: I suppose another factor was that early on a lot of the articles were coming from our own students.

JK: They were, yes, but at the same time we did more approaching. We approached people well-known in the field of ELT – the idea being that if we mixed the newcomers with established names we might draw people in. For the initial issues we drew on a fairly small circle of academics we already knew such as Dave Willis.

RS: So the idea was to make it into something people would want to publish in?

JK: Yes, and also we were thinking of readership. A journal has to have readers, so perhaps this was a bit of an underhand ploy – the big name might draw people into reading the journal but at the same time once they’d got into the journal there

might be other people's articles they might read. But, actually, even for experienced academics there were some advantages because they might have an article which they wanted to publish – perhaps developing an idea but not quite ready enough for another journal.

RS: Getting back to this issue of apprenticing newcomers – and it's definitely linked to the issue of how far we think we should or can go in helping authors to revise their papers – I think it's changed partly because we've changed as a journal. Over the last couple of issues we've gone online and I think we've become better-known. Since the last issue, in particular, which we publicised much more widely than before, we've had more unsolicited contributions coming in, so this changes the relationship with writers. With more people submitting you reject more – there's a need to do so and you perhaps have the luxury of rejecting more.

Also there are our own surrounding conditions of work which have changed. I don't think we have the luxury of time to mentor which we may have used to have. When I started helping to edit the journal (about 2000 or 2001), we would tend to approach people to write in the journal and would hardly receive any unsolicited contributions – and a good proportion of the people we would think of approaching to write an article were our own former students here at Warwick, or, in those days, students at Birmingham as well. As an editorial panel we'd think together of good MA dissertations we'd supervised which we could help our former students turn into articles. So that was definitely a continuation of a mentoring relationship that had already been there in the supervisor–student relationship – a kind of extension of our own teacher education work on the MAs here, in other words.

I think if there is 'something there' in a submission that is not quite right in other aspects, we would still want to engage in that kind of mentoring relationship that we established from the earliest issues – almost rewriting something sometimes – I've had that experience with some of the contributors to the volumes I've edited.

Another thing is that we also want to encourage people from countries or regions which don't easily get represented in international academic journals. Such contributors might be writing about a particular place or context which hasn't been written about much — we may want to go further to help those kinds of contributors.

JK: I think that's very true, because in a way teacher education in the UK in ELT is relatively undeveloped. Years ago you used to be able to do a PGCE [gain qualified teacher status] in ELT in this country but then the Government withdrew funding on the grounds 'why should we finance people who are then going to go and teach overseas?'. That meant the notion of teacher education or training in ELT here in the UK was rather limited, so in a way people from other contexts are ahead of the field. They are grappling with the issue of developing well-constructed systems of teacher education in ELT. It's quite important that we brought and continue to bring those people in. I think you're right also about encouraging people who perhaps wouldn't normally come forward. Of course there's a much bigger field of teacher educators out there in the world than there is in the UK. The UK has a very limited arena in terms of ELT teacher education itself – mostly the Cambridge qualifications in DELTA and CELTA or Trinity College qualifications, which adopt a very specific view, or MAs in ELT, which are primarily an academic qualification.

RS: Yes – I'm just looking at Volume 1, and there's an article from Namibia; in Volume 2 there's one from China, one from Romania, and so on ... *ELTED* has always had this international focus. I'm linking the two – the issue of developing a mentoring relationship with at least some contributors and the issue of wanting to encourage contributions from a wide range of contexts in the world – because it can be the case that people in those contexts don't have all the resources available, for example access to journals that might be considered necessary if writing for an academic journal. So in those kinds of situations, let's say 'difficult circumstances', I think we'd go the extra mile in mentoring and I think that has continued to be the case, for example with the article we had in the last issue on teacher education work in Africa.

JK: Yes, it is problematic, isn't it, this sort of tension? Because there's a great pressure if you're writing for an academic journal, there's a great pressure to produce writing which conforms to the traditional academic journal conventions in terms of style, academic references, the way it's written – all these kinds of things which as you rightly say may not be available to people working at the 'coalface' of teacher education. That's problematic. If you're in teacher training in Namibia you might be in a small town where

resources are very limited. It's going to be very difficult for those sorts of people. They may be doing something quite dynamic and creative in terms of teacher education but really finding it very hard to put it into the kind of academic and theoretical framework that the journal might demand. Yet there is something underpinning the whole thing that is theoretical, important and conceptually challenging but they don't have the resources to put it all into print. I think that tension is a big problem. When you try to get respectability from the academic community sometimes they *push* you in a direction you don't particularly want to go. You feel also you have to get that recognition yourself from your own department, from your own university, if that's where you're doing your teacher education work.

EU: This seems to relate to the third issue we were going to talk about it, which is 'What is our view on the norms of academic writing which are 'acceptable' for *ELTED*, and how flexible are we? Do we welcome/encourage papers that don't fit within these academic norms?'

RS: This issue has come up in recent discussions we've been having, hasn't it, and I would hope that we don't see ourselves as a purely or narrowly academic journal. Although *ELTED* is based in a university, we are open to different genres. We aren't focused entirely on the conventional kind of academic article – although at the same time I think for main articles we do tend to have a criterion for inclusion or exclusion which goes something like 'Is the article based on some kind of research?'. In fact, in some ways that's what distinguishes us from journals such as *The Teacher Trainer* which are more practically oriented. I think we want to encourage different genres, though, for example, action research reports and other kinds of report of teacher education and development practice.

JK: Yes I think the editors and the people who edit particular issues, are very much of that opinion. I suppose what I'm saying partly is that the people who, you know, run the journal or edit it are themselves part of an academic community and I suppose I'm thinking partly of those external pressures, upon the academic, outside of the journal. Because we operate within an institution, within a university, and I think that's where the pressure comes from. *We* feel quite confident and think that it's the right thing to do to try and widen the remit of the journal but persuading the university that this is something worthy is difficult.

Universities these days are so preoccupied with measurement and research assessment that it's a shame – I think it's a tragedy really because if you are involved in teacher education this is taking a very narrow view. I think there is a feeling in the profession as a whole that the whole notion of genre and academic writing has become really ... is manacled people into certain ways of writing. I went to last year's 'Cutting Edges' conference in Canterbury and I noticed a lot of people were saying that they had tried to write an article in a completely different genre or style, in a different way, almost story-telling and had found it very hard to get journals to accept it as a valid way of writing. 'This is not research', they'd been told. And they were saying 'Well it is. It's narrative enquiry', or whatever you want to call it.

RS: Well, we would be open to that...

EU: Yes, we would. Perhaps we'll be the ones pushing the boundaries! In this volume we do have a couple of definitely 'practice focused' papers – the ones by Sheena and Clari are kind of reports on practice but which draw on existing research – not their own research but other people's research. There's a mixture there.

RS: Yes. We've also had a specific 'ELTED around the world' section in previous issues, which might be almost a journalistic report in a sense about what is happening in teacher education in different countries. But if I could just go back to this notion of Action Research reports. I think you've tried to have an opportunity for that from the beginning?

JK: Yes, we did. We had a section on it.

RS: Yes, in Volumes 1 and 2. What was the thinking behind it?

JK: We were trying to reach teachers in the field engaged in researching their own practice. Many articles tend to look back at research, perhaps pieces of research done in the past – solid bits of research often done as part of an MA. So we felt that Action Research might be something more prospective. Teachers might think 'Well if I do this, I might be able to write about it', and also of course there's the old axiom that Action Research does need to be written about to be of value. If you keep it to yourself, it's not a lot of use to anyone else. So it was kind of looking ahead and saying 'Why don't you do some action research? – here is a venue for you'. So to some extent we

thought it might encourage people to engage in Action Research. Especially teachers ...

RS: In terms of Teacher Education and *Development*, which is in our title, it's for teachers to report on their own development. Not purely focused on teacher education in the sense of 'doing things to others'. I think we've had that thread, that reflective practice type of writing, going through – but it's come and gone.

JK: Yes, it's come and gone.

RS: I would hope that it's something that could come again. I'm just remembering something an editor of another journal said to me – 'you get what you print, you get what you publish' in terms of people sending you contributions. So – this was your idea really – if you publish Action Research, that's what you're going to get sent in...

JK: Yes, and I do think this journal has a great advantage over journals like, say, *ELTJ*, in that we are both editors and owners. I think with many journals the editors can have quite a problem in that they are owned by a publishing company who are obviously going to be interested in other things such as readership, volume sales, ranking, costs, those sorts of things, and I think to some extent if you have your own journal you can be more courageous, more innovative because you haven't got the publishers breathing down your necks. In fact one of the disputes we had in the early days was that some people wanted to get the journal taken over by a publisher. That was a big driver – 'We must get the journal into a state where a publisher could be persuaded to take it over'. That was partly so that it would reach a wider readership and we'd have more money behind us to cover our production costs, but at the same time there were others who thought 'Well, once we go down that route, we'll inevitably be forced down an academic journal route'.

RS: Yes, well that's something that could come up again. One issue is whether or not the journal can continue to be institutionally supported.

JK: Yes, that's right. One driver for approaching a publisher was that it was hard to get support within the institution for it. People said 'What is this? Why aren't the publishers supporting it?' And we would say, 'Well we haven't approached them. Why should we?'. I think that tension will be quite an issue.

RS: What do you think now about its current situation? Do you think that's a possibility? I mean one thing that's changed has been the Internet. The journal's gone on-line and reaches many more people now, with very low production costs, though we do have to devote quite a lot of our own research time to it.

JK: Yes, it's not such an issue now. Putting *ELTED* on the Web has been a really important development and having publishers behind it is not such an issue now. I hope it will stand on its own feet as a journal people will want to access.

RS: One thing Steve [Mann: a recently joined member of the editorial panel] thought of is linking articles to actual clips of classroom activity. If we're thinking of action research reports, it would be truly innovative.

JK: Yes, it would be. And I think it would be very attractive. We all love to see others teach. We could watch a lesson and have an article – or even articles – related to it. I think this would be really good.

EU: A final issue, and one we haven't really touched on, is 'What are our grounds for rejecting a submission?'

JK: Yes, one of the problems that I feel, and that's probably because I'm old, is that you want the article to be saying something relatively new, or looking at something at least from a new angle and one of the problems when accepting papers from people not involved in the academic world is that in a sense they are very much doing what they are doing rather than reading the literature. And they may come up with something and you think 'this is something that's been around a few or many times before'. And that, for me, is a difficult issue. Because it's new for them, and their community, but as you get older you think 'I've heard this before'. Rejecting it because it's not original or new enough is a very delicate issue. But I'm more accepting probably than I should be of what some might see as a not very rigorous research methodology – it's the ideas behind that I'm interested in. I don't know what you feel?

EU: I think one of the basic criteria is whether there is any specific emphasis on or relationship to teacher education or teacher development.

RS: Yes, that's quite clear cut for us. But if you feel there is something there, something

interesting, we sometimes ask if the person submitting the article could give it a teacher education or development angle – that’s possible too. Quite often recently we’ve received things which have nothing to do with teacher education and development.

JK: Yes, as the journal gets known, more and more people are likely to submit things which are not really to do with teacher education.

RS: I wonder if the title is a little confusing? It’s rather long if we spell it out in full, and *ELTJ* [*ELT Journal*] and *ELTED* sound a bit similar. If you are involved in Teacher Education or Development you probably know what it is, but if you are not involved, then...

JK: Yes, people might think it means English Language Teaching as against English Language Teacher Education. Yeah, it’s a good point. Titles are funny things. I think it’s always good if they can be shortened. ‘ELTED’ was chosen partly because you could say it! But you may be right. The title might be a bit confusing. Of course we had to avoid some titles because some journals already had them, particularly in the general education field, such as the *Journal of Teacher Education* and so on. It might be worth looking at again.

RS: It might be, but personally I think the title is good. I suppose if it were ‘English Teacher Training’ that would be clearer, but we want to use ‘education’, not ‘training’ for philosophical reasons. I think it still has a niche, a value as a journal.

JK: Coming back to grounds for rejection, there’s the simple one of it’s just not well-written. That relates to how far we see our role as revising things. That’s very difficult.

RS: That is very difficult. I’ve become more and more conscious of this as an issue over the past 15 years – starting with when I was editing a newsletter in Japan. I tended to rewrite a lot of what people wrote but looking back, I think I perhaps sometimes had a rather arrogant ‘native speakerist’ attitude that it was my role to take ‘bad English’ and to make it into ‘good English’. That was unproblematic in my mind for a few years. But I became more aware of power relationships between native speakers and non-native speakers of English, partly because I was actually challenged by some people who told me ‘don’t

change what I write – I want to write in my own voice’.

JK: Yes, it’s difficult. You’re hoping you’ve got an international readership and at the same time you know there isn’t just one accepted norm for International English so you can’t afford to say we’ll accept Chinese English but not the English of some other place ... I mean you’d have to accept all of them or none of them. That could be a little problematic sometimes in terms of comprehensibility, don’t you think?

RS: Well yes, I’m just raising the issue with one hat on. As an editor of *ELTED* I haven’t actually managed to get to the stage where I necessarily accept the way of writing we’re presented with. It’s an issue in flux. I think we’ve hardly begun to think about it.

Let’s think more concretely about an article which we’ve accepted – I would read it and try to change it using ‘Track changes’ with both deletions/corrections and comments to make it better but always send it back to confirm. One of the first things I wrote myself that was published had a lot of changes I was unhappy with made by the editor. I felt it was very bad that they hadn’t asked me. So I think we should always highlight changes we’ve made and check they’re acceptable. And if on that basis they say I prefer the way it was written we’d rethink. It’s hardly ever happened though. When I’ve been editing I have sometimes tended to suggest quite a lot of corrections and contributors have said they’ve been happy with that.

JK: Yes, and native speakers sometimes need their writing to be corrected, too. It depends. Sometimes you can’t understand, it’s just not clear. Whether the writer is a native speaker or a non-native speaker is not really the issue. I tend to feel that it’s perhaps less of an issue than we sometimes think it is. In other words, if we spoke to authors, whether Chinese or Malay or whatever, if they are writing in English, I suspect most feel quite happy about the notion that it’s been polished to standard English. I think a lot of them haven’t got this concern about wanting to use a local form of English *in writing* that perhaps some academics have.

RS: I agree. It’s not just native or non native. I’ve learnt a lot from people I’ve sent my articles to in the past. Or I’ve got feedback from friends or colleagues before I sent an article or chapter in.

They've said 'you should rewrite this, etc.'. I've learnt a lot about how to write from that.

JK: I think people don't mind if you are saying 'I like your ideas but perhaps it could be clearer'. But I remember one of our research students saying recently how she hadn't found the feedback she'd got from one journal editor helpful; it was demoralising. I think this can be counted as a sin of many academics. They use feedback to show off – that they know the field – and that's something I feel strongly about.

RS: It comes back to a question of relationships, and whether there's a mentoring relationship, doesn't it? The reviewer may be writing to the editor of the journal to say what a great person they are, not to the writer to help them improve their writing. We do engage in peer review, but still don't receive so many submissions that we have to send them out much for review, that is, beyond the editorial panel and the advisory board.

JK: With journals edited by major publishers it's very different because the 'in-house' editor may not know very much about the field. Or with medical journals, for example, the editor's not going to know about specialized areas. But all five or six of us on the editorial panel are working in teacher education or development, and I see no reason why we can't carry on reviewing the bulk of submissions ourselves.

EU: Apart from the issue of revising language when we have accepted an article, though, what do we do when we reject an article?

RS: Well, we don't give much feedback when we decline. Do you think we should give more?

JK: I have mixed feelings about giving lots of feedback. I think it's very doubtful anyway – there's no evidence that giving lots of feedback improves performance in teacher training, and I'm not convinced that giving lots of feedback is necessarily useful to writers either.

RS: I agree with that – when declining. We shouldn't raise hope that we'll give lots of feedback to someone we're not going to take on. Once we decide, though, I think we give plenty.

JK: Yes, that distinction's useful.

EU: Though I think when we turn down a submission, we do generally try to give some brief reason or explanation why we can't accept. One or two people have asked for that, I think, so I guess we try to give some response – i.e. give one or two brief pointers for what might need to be done to make the article acceptable for publication somewhere. So that connects back to some extent with our mentoring role we talked about earlier.