

Learning with Editors: Lessons from a Long-Running Short Course

As someone who came to medical journals from training in “straight” journalism, I had always been puzzled by a number of questions. Why were the articles written in a way that ignored the advice of all great writers on writing? Why were medical journals not using the techniques and practices used routinely by newspapers and magazines to communicate effectively? How had the needs of authors come to overshadow the needs of readers?

I got a great opportunity to explore those questions 8 years ago when Richard Smith, editor of the *British Medical Journal* (BMJ), asked me to set up a 2-day training course for medical-journal editors. We have run it every year since, attracting about 20 editors at a time, from the UK and many other countries. One important addition has been the introduction, 3 years ago, of a BMJ scholarship, which funds one person from a developing country to spend a week in England, first visiting the BMJ and then attending the course.

Each course is evaluated, and over the years we have learned many things. One of the early lessons was the need to define a broader curriculum. According to our pre-course questionnaires, editors have a fairly narrow view of their task, often seeing it as being a kind of chief reviewer. They leave the course with a wide array of action points in subjects that they had not previously considered, such as clarifying their own “mission”, redesigning the publication, running a reader’s survey, saying “no” to eminent people, recruiting a younger editor, and even “sacking the business manager”. “It definitely made me evaluate both my role as an editor and where my journal is heading”, wrote one editor, adding, “It reignited the enthusiasm I felt when I started the job and gave me more confidence in my own opinion.”

We have also adjusted how we teach the course. For the first 2 years, we had a team of five tutors, including two eminent editors and one publishing director. The interaction among them was brilliant and erudite but not always appropriate to the needs of smaller journals. We now have two tutors (me and Harvey Marcovitch, a pediatrician and editor) and much tighter control. We divide

Editors’ course: the curriculum

1. Owners: the world of publishing and the electronic revolution, economic survival, dealing with owners and publishers, and the role of the editor.

2. Readers: structuring a journal and Web site with a good balance of contents, basic principles of good design, improving readability through structure, style, “page furniture”, and “layering”.

3. Authors: setting up efficient copy-flow systems, meeting current requirements on peer review, authorship policies, and attracting good authors—and keeping them.

4. Public responsibility: dealing successfully with outside pressures, legal and ethical issues, “causing trouble”, and writing press releases.

the editors into groups and give them plenty of exercises, so the emphasis is no longer on editors teaching editors, but on editors doing their own learning. As one commented last year, “Having come here deeply suspicious of being lectured to, I found myself being provoked and stimulated.”

The growing number of people from developing countries has also taught us an important lesson, which is that glibly exporting a Western model is not appropriate. Electronic publishing is of little interest to those working in a university where there may be only two telephone lines. Knowing the finer points of ethical manuscript selection are irrelevant when you can’t find enough articles to fill the journal. And the details of technical editing pale into insignificance if you can’t find even one person in the area for whom English is not a second (or third) language.

Our final lesson has been that editors like their creature comforts. The first year’s course was in spartan university accommodation. Over the next 3 years, after forthright feedback from the delegates, we moved steadily upmarket. We now use a comfortable hotel in Tunbridge Wells, south of London. So perhaps the real moral of this story is that editors of medical journals are, underneath, no different from anybody else.

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For further information on the course and BMJ scholarship, visit www.timalbert.co.uk/editors.htm.