

# Keepers of the Metaphorical Gate: The Role of Journal Editors

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## Recommended Citation

Taylor, Edward; Nesbit, Tom; Boud, David; Zukas, Miriam; Osborne, Mike; Alfred, Mary; Savage, Paulette Issac; Hill, Bob; and Jarvis, Peter (2007). "Keepers of the Metaphorical Gate: The Role of Journal Editors," *Adult Education Research Conference*.  
<http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2007/symposia/5>

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# Keepers of the Metaphorical Gate: The Role of Journal Editors

Edward Taylor, Tom Nesbit, David Boud, Miriam Zukas, Mike Osborne,  
Mary Alfred, Paulette Issac Savage, Bob Hill and Peter Jarvis

**Abstract:** Academic journals are central to a discipline's professionalism and are the principal means of communication. The purpose of this symposium is explore the nature academic journals, their purposes and what they reveal about the field from the perspective of nine editors whose primary mission is to cover the broad field of adult education.

## Introduction

Much can be learned about a field of study through its research accomplishments, policy orientations, and reflections on practice that are regularly disseminated in scholarly journals, books, and other manuscripts. Academic publications not only represent the knowledge base of a given discipline, but as well reflect its history, trends, and research norms. They also play a role in establishing scholarly credentials and maintaining recognition by providing a social structure of communication between scholars and others with professional expertise. (Brockett, 1991; McGinty, 1999). This is particularly crucial for a relatively new field like adult education. How adult education practitioners and scholars talk to each other through their journals and other publications, although necessarily partial and subjective, both reflects and constitutes the field and helps shape its future development.

In a field that so values self-reflection, it is perhaps not too surprising that the practice of considering the scholarly publications in adult education has existed for some time (e.g., Dickinson & Rusnell, 1971; Hayes, 1992; Taylor, 2001). Over the last 30 years there have been several analyses of journal publication patterns relating to the gender, status and institutional affiliation of authors, the length of articles, their subject, methodological orientation and receptivity to feminist and international issues. As laudable as these efforts are, however, most analyses have focused on one publication—*Adult Education Quarterly*—to the comparative exclusion of other journals in the field. Furthermore, one voice that is rarely heard (at least publicly) in such discussions is that of the journal editor—the human face behind the metaphorical gate. Academic journals are central to a discipline's professionalism and a principal means of communicating knowledge among scholars. Their editors, therefore, play a crucial role in any process of legitimization and control (Wellington & Nixon, 2005). What perspectives on adult education do different editors provide through the window of their journal? What might they say about the nature of an academic journal itself, its ends and purposes, epistemological emphases, and academic norms? How do academic journals contribute to or downplay particular worldviews of adult education? What are editors' motivations and interests? What tensions and contradictions exist in their work? In an effort to address such questions, this symposium brings together several journal editors from the international field of adult education to subject this important aspect of academic work to greater scrutiny. The journals represented in this symposium are those whose primary mission is to cover the broad field of adult education: the *Studies in the Education of Adults*, *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, *Convergence*, *Adult Learning*, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *Canadian Journal of the Study of Adult Education*, *Adult Education Quarterly*, and *Studies in Continuing Education*.

### **Studies in the Education of Adults – Miriam Zukas, Editor**

At the back of each edition, the journal sets out its stall: to acknowledge and promote the study of the education of adults as a field of study in its own right; to recognize the importance of theory in academic debate and encourage its development; to support innovative research which challenges conventional wisdom; to ensure a diversity of voices and paradigms to express the variety in the field as a whole; and to provide a forum for critical debate. But these are not just warm words: the Editorial Board, who meet regularly, debate what these aims mean; the International Advisory Group (IAG) for the journal challenges the Editor and Board about these aims; authors are asked to assess whether or not they meet the aims before submitting to the journal, and encouraged to contact the Editor early in the process; reviewers are encouraged to bear these aims in mind when reviewing papers; and regular editorials return repeatedly to discuss them. I tend to use the Editorial as a way of talking through some of these issues, although I am not always sure anyone's listening. In other words, as Editor, I try to develop a shared understanding of the journal's scope and purpose, so that each time I open a newly-arrived manuscript and decide whether or not to send it out for review, I do so mid-conversation, as it were. This is not to suggest that members of the Editorial Board and I are always in agreement with each other, with authors or even with reviewers: but by publishing certain papers and not others, we are acutely aware that not only do we legitimate the claim that there is a field of study, but we also co-construct that field of study.

We do this in agreed ways. For example, although a journal like *Studies* cannot deny its British identity, for a while now, the IAG and the Board have been keen to internationalize the content of the journal because we see, as part of our role, the promotion of different philosophical and research traditions and the encouragement of intellectual discourse across those traditions. An analysis by IAG members a couple of years ago suggested that, although we were making some progress, as one member put it, 'the journal seemed to represent the UK and the parts of the empire that became dominated by people from the UK and its traditions, educational systems and perspectives.' (Zukas, 2004, p 161). There are challenges in working with and supporting contributions from colleagues from, for example, Europe, not least because regular reviewers may be confronted with discourses and ideas with which they are not familiar and could be dismissive. But it works both ways. In seeking to push the boundaries we may reject excellent papers about adult education but, being good educators, we attempt to do so constructively, rather than dismissively. This process may act against authors' best interests: clear rejections with helpful suggestions from reviewers on how to improve the paper can result in resubmission, with all the work that entails. Sometimes I wish we were less educational and more brutal at the start!

### **Journal of Adult and Continuing Education - Mike Osborne, Editor**

The challenge for me over the last few years has been to turn what was originally a rather parochial practice-orientated Scottish journal into one which still reflects its origins, but which draws upon contributors around the globe offering policy, practice and research perspectives. I am strongly motivated to provide a voice for those who can offer scholarly contributions from a range of perspectives, and particularly from those who are under-represented in some mainstream publications. I have therefore strongly encouraged contributions from non-OECD countries, particularly in Africa, and whilst not compromising in quality have been willing to work with authors not experienced in the conventions of the journal. Similarly there has been an effort to engage with potential authors from the non-university sectors of education, particularly

from vocational education. Adult education is not defined tightly by *JACE* and a lot of what we publish tends to be on the edge of the interests of other sectors. The focus is best described as post-compulsory, encompassing the formal, the non-formal, and the informal. It would be quite possible to consider publishing an article about the informal continuing education of adolescents who had left compulsory schooling at age 12. I have also been keen to seek research articles that are strong both quantitatively and qualitatively, and give equal prominence to each approach when I can, and encourage multiple methods. Whilst encouraging pieces that are reflections on policy, this does occasionally lead to tensions, since this appears to be interpreted by some authors as an invitation to contribute an extended essay that merely summarises a literature and little more. The encouragement that I have given to authors from non-English speaking backgrounds has created tensions as much as I receive a number of pieces that would require extensive editing for language, and I have to balance how much of this work can be done at an editorial level against the objective of extending our coverage.

Like *Studies in the Education of Adults*, it's not possible to ignore our British origins, but perhaps to an extent like all journals not within the 'mainstream' of Education we are ignored by some of the British. Informal league tables as they pertain to that (principally though not totally) British obsession with research quality as manifested by outlets cited in the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which amongst other things assesses the quality of individuals' contributions, and then aggregates these to an overall discipline score, which in turn has a huge impact on government funding. None of the journals represented here would get into the top 20 using citation criteria derived from the RAE and despite the assertion that it is quality not location that determines scoring in the exercise, I suspect few believe this. This is, however, a little partial on my part since University Continuing Education (UCE) did itself few favours in the exercise of 1992 when clearly many submissions from the UCE community were even to the most partial of eyes were at best ill-judged and at worst poor. This may have coloured the view of generic journals to submissions from UCE, and the wider educational community to both research in UCE/Adult Education and the journals within that tradition. Yet at the same time with the emerging scholarship in UCE the generic journals are still the first choice of many colleagues for whom reputation is seen as a vital characteristic. Is this a peculiar British problem?

### **Convergence – Bob Hill, Editor**

*Convergence* is the official journal of the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), published by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE). It was the first international journal in adult education, and has the longest record of university library subscriptions of any adult education journal in the world. In May 2006, the journal instituted a new leadership structure, consisting of an editorial team and an Editor-in-Chief. As on many new occasions, this opens up the possibility to "make the road by walking it." My brief time as Editor-in Chief has been during a period marked by growing global tensions due, in part, to Western imperialism and U.S. militarism; seemingly universal fundamentalism; and shrinking space for democratic practice almost everywhere. Given the mission of ICAE, to promote lifelong learning as a necessary component for people to contribute creatively to their communities and live in independent and democratic societies, the journal's *raison d'être* is patently obvious. Adult and lifelong learning are deeply linked to social, economic and political justice; equality of gender relations; the universal right to learn; living in harmony with the environment; respect for human rights and recognition of cultural diversity, peace and the active involvement of women and men in decisions affecting their lives (<http://www.icae.org.uy>).

*Some Thoughts: On Content.* Tension between identity (established by the mission of the journal as an arm of the ICAE) and policing what is appropriate subject matter is bracketed by article requirements. Manuscripts must be written for more than a local audience—unless these have international adult education or adult learning applications. In a way, the journal forces authors to policing their own work by asking them to put themselves in the position of a colleague in another part of the world and answer, “Does this article include what I would wish to know about a country or programme other than my own?” The journal accepts materials in the form of Feature Articles (5000 words), Information Reports (800 words) and Book Reviews (1000 words)—but page numbers are negotiable at this time. It is interesting to note that *Convergence* does not require transfer of copyright, and so articles published elsewhere, with proper citation to previous publication and approval of the original copyright holder, could be republished here.

*On Methodologies.* The journal is practice based. Heavily statistical research reports are not accepted, however, interpreted data, results, and conclusions in terms of practical application and lessons learned may be suitable. The very nature of the preferred methodologies, establishes borders around what is published. On Participation. *Convergence* is currently a publication of narrow circulation, with a paucity of subscribers, particularly in the majority world (the Non-English speaking, technologically developing nations). This obscures the journal’s objective to be a site of international reflection, critique, and vision. Also, there is an overall dearth of manuscripts submitted, and there is an even larger gap in manuscripts tendered by authors from the majority world. It is critical that both the submission of manuscripts and journal subscriptions represent these regions, especially since many journals in the field are striving to internationalize at this time.

*On Production.* Effectively generating interest in a journal, editing one, and assisting in its promotion and marketing requires resources—time, fiscal, material, and human. At this point in the journal’s history, some of these resources are in short supply. As a result, we are generously supported, and heavily subsidized, by NIACE.

*On Language.* The journal webpage reports that manuscripts are accepted in English, Spanish, and French. In reality, under most circumstances, full capacity exists to only accept manuscripts in English, with the potential for Spanish Abstracts. We are well aware of the hegemony of the English language; however, accepting manuscripts in other languages presently imposes difficulties. There is some resistance to an English-only international publication. This is understandable since the dominant, English-speaking cultures’ behaviors, attitudes, values and assumptions are inextricably linked to the language. Interesting to me, shortly after assuming editorship, I learned that within English there is an ideologically based hierarchy as well. A noted scholar wrote expressing hope that the journal would not change spelling to “American” English, but rather keep the Commonwealth (Oxford UK) English. This reflects the antagonism presented by U.S. hegemony, even within “other” English-speaking countries!

*On The Future.* *Convergence* is at a tipping point. We need manuscripts written in a reflective informal style (without being academically enigmatic or mystifying) that represent the critical practice of adult education and learning for global justice; the history of the journal has set this precedent and the present moment cries out for it. My goals include continuing to produce a quality journal with wider circulation, providing greater journal access to the majority world; having an on-time publication; and becoming financially solvent.

### **Adult Learning – Mary Alfred & Paulette Issac-Savage, Editors**

*Adult Learning* is a practitioner-oriented journal that attempts to bridge theory and practice to support the work of adult educators in various settings. Once a theme-based journal, it now has a peer-reviewed component which was implemented as a result of continued requests from beginning scholars for a more accessible publication venue. Collaborating from a distance, the two co-editors manage the editorial process, keeping in mind the scope and purpose of the journal. Because *Adult Learning* is not classified as a “tier one” journal, there is a tendency for contributors to submit work that is less than scholarly, but may have practical significance for practitioners in the field. Our challenge, therefore, is to balance scholarship and practice while remaining committed to the quality of materials we publish. From a review standpoint, our reviewers are all university professors and they approach the review process with the same academic rigor that they expect of themselves and their graduate students. As a result, many of the manuscripts submitted for peer review often get rejected. Upon our review, if we find that the material presented has some practical significance, rather than reject it outright, we provide developmental feedback for a rewrite and resubmission for another review. Yes, indeed, we play the gate keeping role for we decide who will receive an outright rejection and who will be encouraged to resubmit. The purpose and scope of the journal as well as one's potential for good scholarship drive that decision.

### **International Journal of Lifelong Education – Peter Jarvis, Editor**

The *International Journal of Lifelong Education* was established in 1981, at a time when lifelong education was not part of the main educational vocabulary. This was the first academic journal to focus on lifelong learning and its purpose was and still is to provide an international forum for scholars, academics and informed practitioners working in the fields of adult, continuing, professional and distance education and learning, human resource development and training. We have recently covered field such as learning regions, learning organisation and all forms of individual learning. The journal is concerned to publish both good theoretical papers as well as research reports from all over the world and its internationalism is very important to us so that we will rarely have an issue with contributions from fewer than three countries, unless it is a special issue. It is a journal independent of national organisations and refereed by a body of international scholars selected for their expertise in one or more of these areas. At its foundation it was decided to appeal to scholars rather than to seek a mass circulation although now, through electronic means, it is very widely distributed. We have a policy whereby if we do not accept papers initially we invite re-submission after the authors have read the reviewers' comments. This does not automatically mean that we will publish on re-submission but it does allow greater opportunity for publication. In this sense, the editorial function is also a teaching one.

### **Canadian Journal for The Study of Adult Education – Tom Nesbit, Editor**

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education* (CJSAE) is a refereed scholarly journal committed to the dissemination of knowledge derived from disciplined inquiry in the field of adult and continuing education. CJSAE is owned and published by a Canadian scholarly association established to promote the study of adult education in Canada. The journal is published twice annually and accepts manuscripts written in either English or French. CJSAE's editorial policy claims that the journal will: privilege the Canadian practice of adult education and the practice of Canadian adult educators whilst also maintaining an international focus and appeal; ensure that many of the emergent issues affecting adult education are addressed; and adopt a critical perspective on all aspects of adult education theory and practice. CJSAE

promotes an approach to adult education research and practice as one part of a broader and vital mission for “really useful knowledge” that helps create a more equitable world at individual, family, community and societal levels. As editor, my concern is to uphold and further this tradition whilst also maintaining an avowedly bilingual approach and reflecting the broader concerns of the scholarly association, the diverse interests of fellow adult educators in Canada, and the extensive practice of Canadian adult and continuing education.

### **Adult Education Quarterly – Edward Taylor, Co-Editor**

*The Adult Education Quarterly* (AEQ) is the official academic journal for the American Association of Adult and Continuing Education. Established in 1950 as *Adult Education*, it originally emphasized program descriptions and personal experiences of teaching and adult learning with some university authorship, where as today it focuses exclusively on theory and research and is a major outlet for the academic profession of the study of adult education.

As one of the editors, I believe all publication outlets have their own story to tell. The typical approach is to look back and analyze what has been published. For example, the last six years of the *AEQ* reveals an evolving portrait of scholarship: articles about adult learning still dominate although cultural issues (e.g., gender, race) show a growing presence and there continues to be little research about human resource development, teaching, or historical topics. Another approach, less typical, though just as revealing is reviewing the mission statements of the journal over time. For example, in 1979 the mission of the journal was “devoted to research and theory.... manuscripts concerned with the implementation of the arts and techniques of practice” are seen as more in scope with another association publication. In 2000 the *AEQ* keeps the same focus on theory and research, but now emphasizes the types of methodology and the nature of scholarship. For example, the current mission notes:

The *AEQ* publishes research employing a variety of methods and approaches, including ... survey research, experimental designs, case studies, ethnographic observations and interviews, grounded theory, phenomenology,.... Innovative and provocative scholarship informed by diverse orientations is encouraged, including ... positivism, post-positivism, constructivism, critical theory, feminism, race-based/Africentric, gay/lesbian, and poststructural/postmodern theories.

A consequence of this trend towards more sophisticated theory and research has contributed to less discussion about practice or the teaching of adults. Even though “advancing the understanding of practice” is still central to the mission of the journal, it is an area of research that has been left behind as the journal has evolved. As one Editor, I find the journal risk-averse and slow to change, predominantly shaped by the consulting editorial (CE) board whose members are in many ways are like-minded about the nature of research and standards for publication. This like-mindedness helps ensure consistency, but at the same time discourages publication of manuscripts that don't fit the norms of the journal (e.g., young adults). Like my colleagues I am captured by the same academic norms and standards.

In response to slow changing nature of the journal is recognizing that the selection of the CE board is one of the most important decisions when taking over the editorship of the journal. They are the true gatekeepers, determining what manuscripts go to press, through timely and thorough reviews. Even though my co-editors and I play a role in the gatekeeping process, we see the editor as a liaison between the reviewers and authors honoring the integrity of the reviews, even though at times they are at odds with our own professional opinion. The challenge lies in accurately interpreting the CE's intent and making decisions about the status of submissions when reviews are not in agreement. I believe the editor needs to be both a sentry in



maintaining the integrity the journal, and an advocate for the author(s) who gives much time and energy in preparation of a manuscript. Coming to terms intellectually with the competing voices about a manuscript makes the editorial process exciting and a welcome distraction from the often mundane and instrumental nature of editorial work--writing letters, maintaining contact with authors, and managing the publication process.

### **Studies in Continuing Education - David Boud, Editor**

*Studies in Continuing Education* is an independent international journal not affiliated to any professional body or institution. The editors are based in Australia and the UK. It provides a forum for the presentation of research and the scholarly discussion of issues. When I started as editor I sought to promote work explicitly about continuing education. Today the journal covers more than a narrow reading of its title implies. We publish papers across the broad field of adult and professional education and workplace learning. However, it has in practice taken up some topics more than others.

My experience of trying to influence directions through encouraging authors and commissioning special issues led me to conclude that the effect of this on the direction of the journal is small compared to that of the impact of unsolicited manuscripts. Two examples come to mind. Firstly, we published a number of papers of a post-modernist or post-structural orientation at a time in the 1990s when such papers were not well received in other adult education journals. This was a self-fulfilling process as these papers attracted others until there was a time when I wondered if these perspectives were going to dominate. This trend was not prompted by the editors: it was encouraged simply by treating such papers fairly in the refereeing process by having referees who were either sympathetic to, or at least not opposed to such persuasions and trying to avoid having a preconception that good work was that which fitted into a conventional format. The second example is an emphasis on papers about learning and work. While this was an area of interest of the editors, there were at the time few outlets for papers that didn't fit within the normal boundaries of either vocational education or organisational studies. The trend was driven by a dearth of other journals and by a willingness on the part of editors to respond to the work being generated.

It could be taken from these examples that *Studies in Continuing Education* provided a view of the adult education world from these two perspectives, but it is likely to take up quite different issues and perspectives in the future. Indeed, currently we are seeing a flurry of papers on doctoral education following recognition that there are very large numbers of doctoral students who might be more regarded as engaging in continuing education rather than in initial research training. The window on adult education the journal provides is one that acknowledges that the boundary of the field is ever changing, that it is not worthwhile to contest what is and is not within a given field, and that over time, it might morph into quite a different field altogether. Our current practice is to focus on papers that involve adults learning wherever that might occur, but to stay clear of conventional higher and vocational education as that is very well provided for by a range of other journals: we value quality and accept that this comes in different forms. I cannot predict what new emphases might be: journals survive and flourish only when they are responsive to the environment in which they operate.

### **Reflections**

The expansion of academic publishing, financial pressures, and recent changes in information and communication technologies have led to increased proliferation and specialization of academic fields—in adult education as much as elsewhere. The boundaries and

credibility of any field are becoming increasingly dependent upon the publishing venues that help shape and define it, as are the careers and aspirations of those who practice within it. In this process, the roles of journal editors—usually experienced scholars themselves—are crucial. The abstracts reveal an interesting story about the lives of adult education journals, their purposes, and how they variously respond to, help construct, and provide coherence to the dominant discourses of the field. Although there is much variation between the perspectives shared, there are a number of like issues that are worthy of discussion. One issue is the focus of how these editors see their role. Journal editors generally are responsible to the readership, the author/contributors, and to the journal itself. Even though many of these responsibilities overlap it seems that content of the journal is given the greatest attention (e.g., striving for greater international inclusiveness, speaking to particular topics of interest social justice, human resource development, adult learning). There is little explicit discussion of the readership and a journal's role in relationship to the readership, except for *Convergence* whose Editor asks contributors to think of their colleagues as they develop their manuscript. It would be interesting to know more about our readership in adult education who they are and what attracts or discourages them from engaging the journals in the field.

A second issue related somewhat to the first, is the nature of the content of these journals. Epistemologically it seems that the credibility and viability of journals rests on the need to move from a practice-orientation to an approach that links theory and research. A byproduct of this movement has led to less and less publications about practice and fewer outlets for practitioners or more junior scholars who have not always developed a rich theoretical orientation. Only *Adult Learning* addresses this issue directly. It causes one to ponder on how this emphasis on greater sophistication on theory and research in many of the major outlets of the field discourages entry of non-academicians into the discussion of adult education.

A third issue focuses on the extent to which editors are active in the manuscript review process. A wide spectrum exists with the *AEQ* at one end relying on their consulting editor board to shoulder most of the review decision-making, often privileging their decision over the Editors' decision. Other editors seem to take a more collaborative or somewhat more active role in vetting a manuscript. For example, Editor Zukas finds herself in "mid-conversation" with her editorial board as she reviews a new manuscript. Regardless the degree of involvement in the acceptance or rejection of manuscripts one of the strongest themes is the commitment by editors to educate their contributors, providing feedback and encouraging resubmission. Editor Jarvis sees "the editorial function is also a teaching one." Although this educative role is tenuous at best, its can be demanding and time consuming.

A final theme is the constant demand for high-quality manuscripts. Without enough manuscript submissions a journal cannot survive and stay viable; receiving a limited number of manuscripts puts tremendous pressure on editors to accept manuscripts that are less than acceptable. Ironically, in many ways most of the journals on this symposium panel are competing for the same author-base. Therefore it behooves all of us to regularly encourage and assist authors to publish their work in the adult education outlet that best fits their topic and focus. That way everyone benefits: the more scholarly work we can publish, the better for the field and for its journals.

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