



EDUCATION FOR HEALTH

PERSONAL VIEW

Education for Health: An 'Insider's' Account

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As managing editor for *EfH*, I have been asked to give an account of my experiences working with the journal. First, let me note a few key events:

- **30 years ago**, the Network of Community-Oriented Educational Institutions for Health Sciences (now The Network: TUFH) was founded in Kingston, Jamaica.
- **20 years ago**, the first issue of the *Annals of Community-Oriented Education* (now *Education for Health*) was published.
- **10 years ago**, I started working for *Education for Health*.

The first journal issue of the then new editor, Hilliard Jason, landed on my Maastricht desk in March 1999. In his editorial, Hill wrote: "With this issue of *Education for Health* a new era begins" (Jason, 1999). Indeed, this was true not only for *EfH*, but also for me.

Prior to this era, I had been working at Maastricht University for eight years already - and I had already experienced a culture shock: working as a Belgian in the Netherlands! With *EfH*, I was happy to move from a full-time job with the Economic faculty to a part-time job with the Medical faculty. This was a better fit with my private life as a mom of two young children and a daughter of two elderly parents in poor health.

We started with an almost completely new team: Hilliard Jason, who would become my big mentor, as the new editor; the new associate editor Jane Westberg; Gerard Majoor, already an associate editor for three years having been around when *The Annals of Community-Oriented Education* was remade into *Education for Health*; and me, the journal secretary, a new position on this newly formed team.



During this same period, along with the existing editorial board of *EfH*, Hill added a group of over 70 new peer reviewers from members of The Network and other sources. A lot of these reviewers continue to review for the journal today. They have come a long way with us!

The electronic era of the journal had just started. Prior to this, potential authors could submit their papers in a hard copy format only. Now they were being asked to submit in electronic format along with an accompanying paper version. However, some of our authors, particularly from developing countries, did not have adequate email access, so they sent us a diskette along with the paper copies of their work.

During his tenure as editor, Hill set up the journal's manuscript tracking system. This was a database that allowed us to easily track the papers in our review system. Complete information about every manuscript, every author and every reviewer could be found with just one click of the mouse, which made my life very easy. I have been using this tailor-made system until only more recently, when we changed to our current online submission system.

In the meantime, new journal features were introduced. We started publishing position papers, commentaries, practical advice papers, book reviews and the "Making a Difference" interviews. Later, two more types of interviews were added as well: the "Community Voices" and the "Student's Voice" features.

One of Hill's major successes was getting the journal indexed in PubMed/Medline. This was a significant step that brought a higher level of recognition and esteem to the journal. Its immediate effect was an increase in the number of submissions to *EfH*.

When Ronald Richards took over *EfH* editorship from Hilliard Jason, the journal staff was expanded along with other personnel changes. Jan van Dalen replaced Gerard Majoor, and two new associate editors were added: Pertti Kekki from Finland and Noel Juban from the Philippines, increasing our ability to serve our international audience. Maud Senden moved into the position of journal secretary, and I became Ron's 'right hand' in the new role of managing editor of the journal.

In 2002, there was a major organizational change in The Network: Community Partnerships for Health through Innovative Education, Service, and Research. The Network merged with the WHO programme "Towards Unity for Health" to become The Network: Towards Unity for Health (TUFH). This presented a major challenge to Ron Richards to ensure that this organizational change in the Network: TUFH be reflected in the journal. The "visible" change this brought about was a different colour of the journal cover: from yellow, the colour of the *Annals*; to green, the first six volumes of *EfH*; to now blue, the colour of The Network: TUFH. To publicize and reinforce the organizational change, a complete issue of the journal, under the guest editorship of Charles Boelen, was dedicated to TUFH (Volume 20:2, 2007).

To make this change even more visible, Ron Richards introduced a new feature "News from The Network: TUFH" and started publishing the Network: TUFH position papers. Also during Ron's tenure Jan van Dalen's column "In the News" was born. In addition, Jan assisted Ron with editing and getting manuscripts into acceptable shape for publication.

Ron Richards stressed the importance of evidence. He often put out requests to our authors to summarize their experiences so the journal could publish evidence. "As I have said now many times before, it's essential that the 'doers' also write about what they are doing so the journal can spread the word in a scholarly manner" (Richards, 2002a). "In your manuscripts, tell us what you are doing ... But also tell us what evidence you have that the approach you've described makes a difference" (Richards, 2002b).



Ron, before he retired, recommended that the *EfH* editorship be handled by a team of two co-editors who would share the workload - since the workload of an editor cannot be underestimated! This is especially true given the fact that our editors do this job along with their regular full-time jobs.

This is, in fact, what happened. Michael Glasser and Margaret Gadon came on board in 2006 as the first team of co-editors for the journal. In 2007, Margaret Gadon was succeeded by Donald Pathman, who became the new “teammate” of Michael. And, I must say, we have a strong team! In addition to the co-editors and me, the group now also includes: our five associate editors - Jane, Jan, Pertti, Noel, and Bob (Robert) Woollard, who joined the team in 2007, and Angelique van den Heuvel, our journal secretary.

At that time of the transition to co-editors, the mission statement of the journal was also changed. It now reflects the broader role of The Network: TUFH, incorporating an emphasis on linkages between academic institutions and communities to improve health and healthcare delivery.

The year 2007 was an important one for the journal. It was a time of major change! Although our publisher, Taylor & Francis, had for several years been publishing *EfH* issues online along with print copies, online access was only given to members of The Network: TUFH and to paying subscribers. Now the time had come to reach a broader audience. The Network: TUFH wanted to fulfill its mission of disseminating information and knowledge as widely as possible. To do this, the content of the journal was made freely available to a global audience. In May 2007, *Education for Health* was launched as an open access e-journal. This also for the most part meant the end of the print version of the journal (although the African Network: TUFH members still receive print copies for their libraries.)

Launching an e-journal also required that authors submit their articles online. Even though we originally were concerned that authors from developing countries might experience a disadvantage in this process, this has not been the case. After a small decline in submissions in 2007, we continue to have an increase in the number of submissions.

Over the years, our journal has collaborated with several other organizations, resulting in the publication of a variety of special issues. Partners in these collaborations have included the *Annals of Behavioral Science and Medical Education (ABSAME)*, Community Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH) and the World Health Organization (WHO). In 2005, we published a joint issue together with the journal *Rural and Remote Health (RRH)*. Even though we did not know it at that time, *RRH* would become an important partner for *EfH* at a later stage.

Getting our issues published nowadays has become a multi-continental event, with our co-editors in America, the journal office in Europe, and the ‘publisher’ in Australia. In this global arrangement, *Education for Health* has a mutual agreement with the Australian Rural Health Education Network to use *RRH*'s infrastructure as our online submission and publication platform.

In reflecting on *EfH*, one of the things I have come to value most, and which has not changed in all of the 20 years of the journal's existence, is the fact that *Education for Health* strives to provide inexperienced authors - especially those from developing countries - with a forum to practice the skill of scientific writing and to get their work published. This point was made in the very first issue of the *Annals* in 1988: “As has been stated in the Publication Policy, the editors in particular welcome contributions from young investigators who are new to the field. Rather than to judge the quality of a manuscript submitted, the Editorial Board sees as its primary objective to help less experienced authors improving their contributions, provided its subject is interesting to a broader audience and the study carried out is methodologically sound” (Schmidt & Vluggen, 1988).



So, while striving for a high standard, we do tend to be more patient than most journals, and work harder to encourage our authors - especially those in the non-English-speaking and developing parts of the world. This is also why we organize writing workshops during the annual Network: TUFH conferences and why we have set up a mentor system for our authors.

The value of a paper is sometimes buried deep within, under layers of less than fluent English, poor structure, vagueness etc. I'm always very happy when we are able to 'salvage' such a paper, that elsewhere would have most likely been rejected. An example of this policy is one of the papers that we're publishing in the current issue of the journal. It was submitted to us back in 2005! The associate editor who did the initial review of this paper wrote to me: "The good news is that I think it is a very important paper, but it still needs a huge amount of work." This article has survived three editors, the author's personal situation and the political situation in the author's country!

Sometimes writing an article and getting it published "takes time, some courage and perseverance" (van Dalen *et al.*, 2004); but it pays off!

To end, I'd like to mention just two of the many things that have left a lasting impression on me:

of sadness:

One of our respected reviewers from Palestine, after the second intifada had begun in September 2000 and her life had come into terrible turmoil, wrote to us: "Please keep sending me manuscripts to review. This will distract my mind from the things that are going on here and will help me preserve my sanity." It was in such a contrast to my personal happiness, since my third child had been born in September 2000.

of happiness:

In September 2007, during the Network: TUFH conference in Kampala, Uganda, I witnessed the happiness of a Kenyan student who had won the Best Poster Award. This student was so utterly overwhelmed with joy. He ran around the place, showing his award to everyone who wanted to see it, he was just so very happy. Seeing this moved me and made me happy also.

I feel privileged to be working for *Education for Health*. I have come in contact with so many wonderful people from all over the world. As Hill Jason once wrote: "The authors, reviewers and editorial board members associated with EfH are genuinely exceptional people. They share a vision and a commitment that is inspiring" (Jason, 2001).

I've had 10 very good years with the journal. I hope to add several more.

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