

Reflections on editing *MT* 2005-2008

Colin Foster found that editing *MT* influenced his classroom practice.

Since September, I have been back on a full timetable at school. This follows three years during which I have enjoyed an afternoon per week funded by ATM to edit *MT* (along with Helen Williams and Robin Stewart). It has been a wonderful experience, if rather all-consuming at times! With a journal to get out every other month, copy arrives from authors at a fairly steady rate, so there is always something new to read and think about. This sits alongside ongoing email conversations regarding pieces currently being worked on. Through editing *MT*, I have got to know many people in ATM much better and met many new and interesting folk I might not have encountered otherwise.

As an editor you have the privilege of seeing many articles that never make it into the pages of *MT*. Often this is because they are mainly focused on mathematical details rather than on learners' experiences of learning mathematics, and such pieces frequently appear eventually in other more suitable publications. So a great deal of very interesting material passes across your computer screen, and I only wish there were time to engage with it all as deeply as I would like. As a practising teacher, I have always been keen to try out article ideas on my classes at school, sometimes telling them that this is what I am doing. I have been particularly impressed with my students' ability not to be overawed by flashy bells-and-whistles ICT presentations when the ideas behind them are weak.

Some parts of *MT* are perfect for immediately lifting into your own setting. A great many of the problems from the *Puzzle Pages* quickly made it into our

school *Fortnightly Mathematical Problems*. (Weekly seems to be too often for busy pupils and teachers to have a real think – and monthly is too infrequent.) The puzzles go out in registers at the start of each fortnight and are pinned up in form rooms. Many form tutors promote the idea or even allow time in spare tutor sessions to work on it. Good puzzles often reward perseverance and careful thinking more than prior knowledge, so the best solutions sometimes come from learners who do not always excel in the classroom. Many staff get involved too, another feature of good puzzles being that they often can be generalised or extended in more challenging ways.

However, for me the most enjoyable, and 'distinctively ATM' parts of *MT* are those articles that are not ready-to-use lessons. Publications such as the *Times Educational Supplement Magazine* focus on lesson ideas that can be more or less instantly applied in the classroom with a minimum of thought or fuss, and *MT* contains such pieces as well. But, within the spectrum of *MT* are also reflective accounts of mathematics learning, which provoke comparisons with incidents in your own classroom and cause you to tinker with your own practice. These are harder to find elsewhere, as they are not always to everyone's taste. There was a debate recently on the *TES* mathematics discussion board (<http://community.tes.co.uk/forums/25.aspx>) regarding the value of belonging to associations such as ATM or MA. The majority of respondents were very positive about the benefits, but there were also some critical remarks. One was that the contents of some journal articles are not immediately

transferable to the classroom and that some articles were too 'abstract' for the practical teacher.

I think there are many teachers who would share these sentiments. Consequently, mainstream publishers seem to want to produce books of 'ready-to-go' lesson plans that require little thought or input from the teacher in their 'delivery' [and heads of department buy these books in their thousands]. When a postman 'delivers' letters, he is not supposed to interfere with the contents of the envelopes – that is not his business. Similarly, books or journals of ready-made lesson plans, though popular, can end up leaving teachers 'out of the loop'. This situation somehow posits that the profession is now full of teachers so busy, or so lacking in confidence or skills, that any deep thinking about pedagogy and planning needs to be done by others. Clearly this can be self-perpetuating. In the same way that learners who are spoon-fed in school end up expecting high levels of teacher direction, teachers who are not permitted or encouraged to exercise their professional judgment and discretion in their teaching will become deskilled and dependent on others, who may not have the same high-minded motives possessed by most teachers. In fact, it is tempting to conjecture that teachers who are highly dependent on and subservient to the producers of their resources will find it hard to encourage their learners to develop an independent spirit towards their thinking and take responsibility for their learning. It is rather like a head chef who is employed to heat up ready-made meals. He will lose his enthusiasm for his vocation and forget how to design a menu or make a soufflé – and eventually he will be replaced with somebody cheaper who is just as good at using a microwave. Much more importantly, the food being served is far less interesting and nutritious.

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