

## A Conversation with the Editor.\*

Alison Farrel and Saranne Magennis

### Maynooth University

On Friday 26th October 2018 I (Alison Farrell) sat down with Saranne Magennis, who has been editor of AISHE-J for the past seven years. The following article is based on that conversation.

So, Saranne, you've retired from Maynooth University as of 30th of September and this month you step down from the editorship of AISHE-J. And in this conversation I hoped we might capture some of your reflections on your work as editor of the Journal.

To begin with, then, I wonder if you can recall at all what your intention was when you took over the editorship of AISHE-J?

That is a really difficult question for at least two reasons: firstly, it is quite a long time ago and memory is not the most reliable faculty, and secondly, because I would say all those years ago, I never really saw myself as having a particular intention in mind. There were things that I thought we could not do and others that I thought we could. As matters stood, especially financial matters, I was strongly of the view that AISHE could not afford to employ an editor; we had very limited funds and there were other things that probably represented a better use of those resources.

Besides intentions, however, there were motivating factors around getting involved ... it is rarely just circumstances; I had an interest in the area and had come round to the view that the journal was well worth the effort it took. When the founding editor, Sylvia Huntley Moore, first suggested the idea of a journal I was not among the

---

\* URL: <http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/1367>

enthusiasts, mainly on the grounds that it looked like a lot of work. Thankfully, Sylvia persisted and the journal began. Through her work, and that of Barry McMullin whose technical set up was critical, when I came to take over as editor I was taking over an established entity rather than an idea. Those early years had demonstrated that the journal was of interest to the teaching and learning community and was fulfilling a need for the community.

Another aspect was that I thought, even at that stage, that the role was not a one person job but needed a team approach. Whether it is a skill or an orientation, I am happiest in a team setting and I thought that maybe I could bring that skill or orientation to the task and do something worthwhile for AISHE-J over a couple years. If pushed to identify a key intention it would be to take it forward in a way that was much more integrated into the AISHE community with a diverse group of people taking on varied tasks. At that particular time I was probably the person who had the most freedom to give the time needed, and the university was prepared to support me in taking it on.

And to what extent did you achieve that goal?

I wouldn't see it as an achievement or a success but I think that within AISHE-J and the AISHE community there are lots of other people who, just like me, prefer to work as part of a team and who support that collaborative approach. I think we have succeeded in making it more team based. We have many people undertaking many different roles within the team. I do not see it as a personal achievement but as a process where we as a group came together. My role was very much to facilitate an approach and encourage colleagues to work together to support the development of the journal. There will certainly be people reading this who will remember me saying that one of my principles, across a variety of activities, has always been that "friends for Saranne are very important" because I do not like to work alone.

Had you seen similar, collaborative models that you believed were effective?

I had seen similar models but not in a journal context because I had never been involved in editing a journal. In a sense, in almost every job undertaken, I have

valued being part of a team and working with the team. Certainly within education and higher education, I believe it is the only way to go. I don't think it is possible in this day and age for anyone to manage and edit a journal alone and continue to do their day job. Also, I think that in a broadly-based journal like AISHE-J we need a wide range of expertise. I can speak reasonably confidently in Humanities and Education and that end of the disciplinary spectrum ... I can even handle a limited range of statistics from experience in one or two jobs I have held. But I have no background in the natural sciences, I do not speak mathematics and I have had no experience of the spectrum of medical and allied disciplines. If we are attracting people in teaching-learning in a wide range of disciplines then we have to have people who understand those dialogues from the inside. It has to be a collaborative and shared effort.

It is not enough in this context to say the peer reviewers will guarantee everything. Their work is essential. But in editing you have to understand what the peer reviewers mean. My view is that for a comprehensive view you need people editing alongside each other. It is especially relevant when, as in the case of AISHE-J, there are the norms of teaching and learning as a discipline to be added to the disciplinary norms of a wide range of subject areas. I certainly have depended on people who could judge that a given argument was defensible or what a particular statistical analysis might mean if there was disagreement between reviewers. Working as part of a team was essential.

The focus on collaboration is interesting, because I'm wondering if success is generally more individual, than collaborative or collective in the Academy?

I think there you are putting your finger on a really important challenge. Collaboration is not easy. It's actually very hard. I think the story of the 'little red hen' is relevant! But I do think [collaboration] persists in higher education and I think there are a lot of people who value it and put in the work. I don't think it's less work to work collaboratively; it could be more to work collaboratively but if all collaborators do a fair share the output can be much more powerful. So, I think it's there, it's valued, but there are also huge pressures towards individual effort and individual success and that, in my view, is not necessarily a good thing. That said, there are people who work most comfortably alone and I think they should be supported and protected.

But not at the expense of those of us who wish to work collaboratively or together. An inclusive working environment would support us all in our different approaches.

Building from that idea of what works and, indeed, what matters in higher education, do you think that publishing should matter as much as it clearly does in this sector?

I am going to answer that in two ways. I think sharing one's work is absolutely irreplaceable in the academy. However, I am as not convinced that publishing is always sharing one's work. I think sometimes it is meeting the requirements for promotion; it can be professional vanity, if that is not too cruel a way to think of it, and it can also take up more time than the outcome justifies. I am not knocking journal articles or publishing. Let me just explain the background to these questions; in my view the academy is about learning. That is primary activity and the next activity, because you have learned, is teaching. As far as I can see, publishing is a form of teaching, not a form of research. Research is part of the learning; you do the work, you discover whatever you discover, you synthesize - all the time to learn. You arrive at a position, a view, an analysis and in order to put it out of the public scrutiny you teach. Otherwise, it stays within your head. It cannot be challenged or built upon and it does not do any good in the world. You may become a very educated and knowledgeable person but only you. If one believes that it would be better for others to benefit, you teach, you share. This teaching may be in the classroom, at conferences and journals or books. All of those settings, or outlets, are teaching, and they are integral to the work of the academy. However, if the goal becomes getting out a set number of papers, in a limited range of specified journals, so that you can be promoted, and if the time that takes undermines your face-to-face teaching, your discussions with colleagues, if it is becoming a fixation, I am not sure that the return on investment is sufficient for the academic community and the wider community.

Thanks for that Saranne; I really like the way that you have explained what seems to be a much more productive way of seeing research and teaching, than the usual divide and debate between them. And so, if you think sharing is important, and that some of that sharing will happen through publishing, as an editor (and indeed an author) what is your advice to writers?

I think my advice is always going to be to write, and to publish. But coupled with that would be advice to think about genre, to think about where you publish and who you talking to. You know that we have had pieces in AISHE-J from people one might say are very “big names” in teaching and learning world. They are people who have published their work in many of the first rank journals. They have also contributed to AISHE-J because they want to be involved in that dialogue, in the community which explicitly seeks to be inclusive, to support early career writers and to publish a range of pieces from a range of genres.

In AISHE-J we decided in addition to traditional research papers, we would publish reports on practice, what we call journeys, reflections, resource collections, and all sorts of things that would not necessarily fit with the mission of the more traditional journals that are often highest ranked in the various indices. I think by offering an opportunity and, by our very well-known colleagues supporting that space, we are encouraging people to learn and to teach, both in the classroom and in the wider academic community. I think that dialogue of this nature is really important.

It's interesting that you mention the range of genres in particular. I wonder, given how academics now reach out to different communities, through a variety of genres and a range of media ... I wonder do you consider your openness in this regard as somewhat prescient?

It is not so much prescience as maybe reading the signs of the times, scanning the environment, recognizing themes and then assisting some of those to emerge. Yes, perhaps it is about open mindedness – again being open to small new developments.

Just three more questions Saranne. The first of them is, looking back, what would you have done differently if you could do it over again?

There are things we could have done differently. But how are we to know that it would have been better? You could say it would have been good to have a formal role of technical editor earlier; it has been a great success. We started thematic issues which made connections with networks and groups. It also allowed us to broaden the range of editing skills that in the AISHE-J community. I think we were

very fortunate in that way things happened just when they needed to happen. We learned together as we worked together.

In the last few years I had in mind to seek out a book reviews editor but I did not do it. I think that was a failure on my part because I think it would make a big difference. I think book reviews are hugely important and I want to explain why I believe so. The first person is that it gives people a chance to assess whether they want to read a particular book. It helps us answer the question: "Is it going to be worth my while to spend my time on this book when my time is so constrained?" That offers a service to the community. Another thing it gives is support to reading because you have to read a book in order to review it. But I think if the most important benefit may be that it offers manageable writing opportunities through which people are encouraged to engage with new materials, to practice their writing skills for publication, and to get into print. I think for many of us, our first published piece was a book review: it certainly was for me.

And what have you enjoyed most?

This is an easy question: the thing I have enjoyed most is the opportunity to talk and listen to and engage with a range of people that I would probably have never met if it had not been for the journal. I have loved the conversations with authors, some of whom were nervous, some of whom were fearful, some of whom could have been upset they got their peer review feedback. In general, there would have been no need for upset. One of the classic things is where somebody gets back, say, five pages of feedback from each of two reviewers and they read all of the suggestions for revision. They do not see the first sentence and last sentences which say: "I think this paper is really interesting" and "with some further work this paper will have a huge impact". They just do not see that. Part of my role has been to ensure that the first thing they see is that both reviewers thought your paper was interesting and worthwhile. Part of my role has been to help people realize that very few people are going to write a long and detailed review of something if they do not think it is worth the authors while to revise it. I like that task of bringing people who are perhaps responding out of their fear or inexperience, maybe it is their first time trying to publish, to the point where they are saying: "This is great. I have everything I need to get this published." It is important for authors to see the feedback as supportive and

helpful. This can be hard when one has put so much work into a paper. But I love the task: it is communicating with people. In a sense that too is a teaching role.

It reminds me ... I remember going for an interview for a public service administrative job, more years ago than I care to remember, where towards the end of the interview, one of the interviewers said: "why are you applying for an administrative post when it seems to me you are a natural born teacher." I have no idea what led him to that opinion but he may have been right. While I did not want a standard teaching role, much of what I have done in this and in other aspects of my career has been in that area of non-standard teaching.

And is it a certain type of teaching, mentoring maybe?

It is a form of mentoring. Teaching is often about helping people to know what they already know, which is all based on your own learning and the learning of the person you're talking to. Colleagues who can write intelligently a 5,000 word paper know a lot about that topic and if they've written it, and submitted it, we need to honour that effort. I think our job as peer reviewers and as editors is to help them connect with that knowledge and maybe add bits and pieces from your own experience to assist them in their process.

And finally, what next Saranne – have you other writing and/or editing plans in the pipeline?

I think in stepping down, I do intend to step down. However, one of the things about operating on a team basis is that I know that if anybody else within the team rings me up and says can you give me hand with this, I wouldn't be a very good team, or former team member, if I weren't perfectly happy to say yes. So I'm absolutely prepared to be an elder lemon in the background – that is one thing.

And I have some of my own writing that I want to do so over the next year - I have a couple of pieces to finish. And beyond that, it's a bit like the question about what was the intention all those years ago. I'm not really sure, but it will be about scanning the horizon and you know, in this case the horizon is behind you, not in front of you, and

seeing which aspects are out there that I could maybe take forward. No major plans as yet but I am hoping to do a bit more writing, and a lot more gardening!

Thank you very much Saranne.

Thank you.