

Academic Journals

AND THE WORK OF EDITORIAL BOARDS: AN INVITATION TO DIALOGUE

Teresa L. McCarty

Editor, *American Educational Research Journal* - Social and Institutional Analysis (AERJ-SIA), and GF Kneller Chair in Education and Anthropology,
University of California, Los Angeles
Teresa.McCarty@asu.edu

“**W**e don’t need anymore ‘publish or perish,’” Professor Annette López de Méndez wrote in response to my email requesting her input on my presentation for this conference. “We want to think about academic publishing as ‘engaging in dialogue,’” she added.

The notion of academic publishing as dialogic engagement, or engaging in conversations around issues of critical local and global importance, is very much how I view my role as editor of the *American Educational Research Journal* section on Social and Institutional Analysis (AERJ-SIA). This also guides my work as an author, a member of editorial boards, and a reviewer. Speaking from all of these perspectives, my goal in this paper is to engage in dialogue about how academic journals can foster this kind of mutual engagement.

In the same email exchange, Professor López also noted that she and her colleagues would like for this to be, in her words, a “provocative” presentation, “with the purpose to inspire and motivate academics and students to write and publish, in order to exchange ideas, innovate, and leave a legacy for the next generation.” In this statement, Professor López captures the heart of the scholarly enterprise — the *reason* for writing and publishing— and the rationale for this conference: to produce knowledge that we care passionately about and that makes a positive difference in the world.

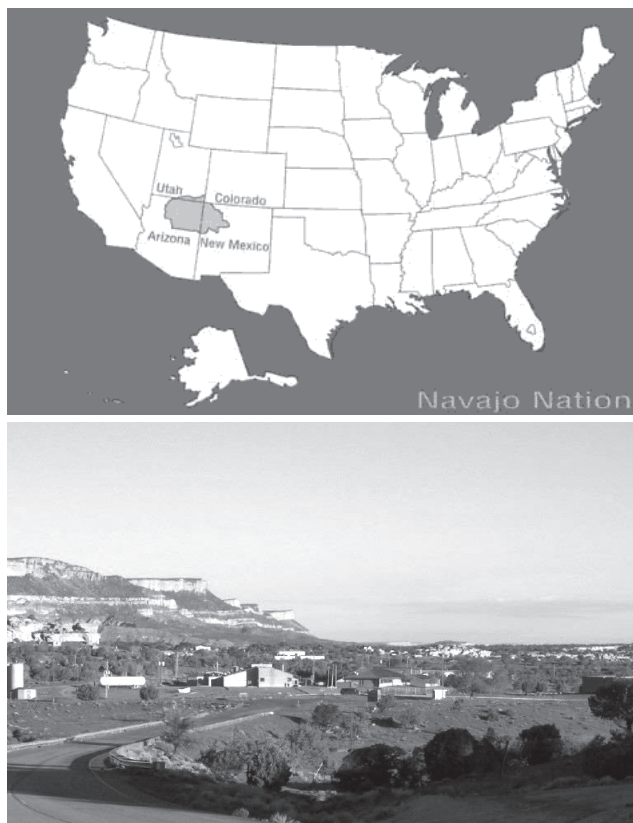


Figure 1. Location of the Navajo Nation in the U.S. Southwest, and photograph of the modern Rough Rock Community School (photograph by Leroy Morgan).

And yet sometimes the mechanisms for doing this seem to be veiled in mystery. This is certainly how I understood academic writing and publishing when I began my academic career. What I would like to do in this paper is pull back the veils and make more transparent the process of publishing in a journal such as AERJ, or any number of international journals. That is, I want to *humanize* the publishing process, including the role of editors, reviewers, and editorial boards.

With that goal in mind, I would like to open this dialogue with two personal accounts. I am an anthropologist of education, and much of my work focuses on the role of language and culture in schooling. I began this work while living and working as

a curriculum developer for a small school on the Navajo Nation in northern Arizona, then called the Rough Rock Demonstration School and now Rough Rock Community School (Figure 1). Founded in 1966, Rough Rock was the first contemporary Native American school to be governed by a locally elected, all-Navajo governing board, and the first to teach in and through the Navajo language.

When I first went to Rough Rock in the 1980s, there was a great deal of scholarly literature which characterized Navajo and other Native American learners as nonverbal, nonanalytical, reluctant to “speak up” in class, and favoring “concrete” versus “abstract” thinking (e.g., Kaulbach, 1984; Marashio, 1982; McShane & Plas, 1984; More, 1989). Native American students were said to be artistic versus analytical, observers rather than talkers, and passive versus active learners. Some scholars even argued that these kinds of learning “styles” were hard-wired in children’s brains. As one author wrote: “Traditional Native American mode of thinking is uniquely different from modern man...recent brain research has disclosed how traditional Native Americans think” (Ross, 1989, pp. 74-75). This author went on describe Native Americans as “poor speakers” who favored “dance” over writing, and were unable to “think in words” (Ross, 1989, pp. 74-75).

My Navajo colleagues and I fervently rejected these racializing characterizations as nothing more than stereotypes that fed low expectations and watered-down curricula for Native American learners. We had developed a culturally based curriculum that emphasized Navajo content and values, active student-generated inquiry, and use of children’s prior knowledge and bilingualism (Figure 2). A pilot study showed this curriculum to be highly effective in engaging Navajo students in collaborative and individual learning while developing their multicultural competence, bilingualism, and biliteracy (McCarty, Wallace, Lynch, & Benally, 1991). Together, my Navajo colleagues and I wrote a paper on this study and submitted it to *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* (AEQ).

AEQ is the flagship journal of the Council on Anthropology and Education, a section within the American Anthropological Association. Figure 3 shows the kinds of topics this journal emphasizes, and it seemed a perfect fit for our work. In the field

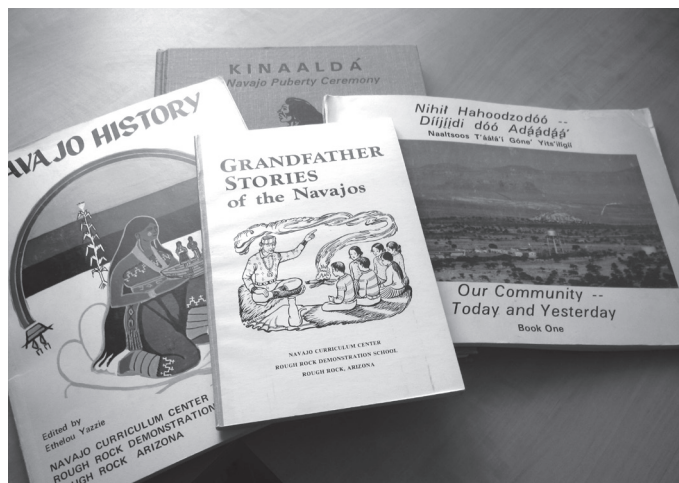


Figure 2. Examples of Navajo bilingual-bicultural curricula developed at Rough Rock School.

of educational anthropology, *AEQ* is considered a premier academic journal. Given its high ranking, it was not all that surprising when, several months later, in the mail there arrived a letter from the editor (this was before the days of email) rejecting our manuscript. Although two reviewers assessed the manuscript as promising, one reviewer wrote a particularly devastating critique, challenging our data as “thin” and based on a single small school, and our analysis as “beating a dead horse” —contributing nothing new to education scholarship or practice.

And yet we knew the “horse” —racial stereotypes of Native Americans as passive, nonverbal, non-analytical learners— was alive and well, not only in the scholarly literature, but in how that literature legitimized low expectations and skill-and-drill curricula for Native American learners. We also recognized that reviewers and editorial boards represent a journal’s readership, and if even a single reviewer found serious fault with our analysis, we couldn’t afford to ignore it.

We went back to the drawing board.

The review process galvanized us to collect additional ethnographic data and to revise our manuscript to directly address the very much “alive-and-well” stereotypes that pervaded the scholarly literature. We gave the paper a new title that directly

enjoin. First is the need to believe in our work, to sustain a passionate commitment to the scholarship and the ideas, and second is a willingness to consider how we might be wrong, and how our work can be improved. Proactive responsiveness to critique can only strengthen the work, and the stronger the scholarship, the greater its impact. In our case, we sought not only to impact a scholarly field, but also to dismantle damaging stereotypes and transform education practice for Native American and other language minority learners.

A third lesson from this publishing experience is to acknowledge but not be deterred or defeated by what can seem like (and is) a gatekeeping function built into the academic review process. As a graduate student, *AEQ* was a journal I felt was only for “established” scholars — the heavy-hitters and leaders in the field. I could only faintly hope that my work might one day be published in such a journal. There are clear power differentials in academic publishing, but power need not paralyze; it can, as this account suggests, motivate and inspire us to improve our work.

Fourth, it is important to recognize that editors are not, as I initially thought, some kind of Oz sitting behind a crystal ball that only they and their editorial boards can see. They are humans who also had a first article published at one point in their careers, and their job is not gatekeeping, but rather helping to strengthen and advance the field by publishing high-quality scholarship on timely and important topics. I learned a great deal from Professor Erickson’s editorial example, and I believe that many editors, myself included, view mentoring the next generation of scholars as an exciting and incredibly rewarding opportunity, and a fundamental editorial role. So, as authors, we should not feel reluctant about contacting and engaging in dialogue with the editor of a journal that we believe might be an appropriate outlet for our work.

As a postscript to this account, 10 years after that article was published, I was appointed editor of *AEQ*, a position I held for the next 6 years.

I want to turn briefly to a second personal story, which I believe holds another lesson of value to this conference. Like *AEQ*, *AERJ* is another journal in which I thought I would never have the opportunity to publish, much less edit. One of six official journals of

the American Educational Research Association (AERA), *AERJ* is one of the largest educational research journals in the world, with a subscribership of about 25,000 (Figure 4). It has an acceptance rate of about 6% of all the manuscripts it receives (and it receives about 800-900 manuscripts a year). As a junior and even as a senior scholar, these did not seem to me to be very favorable odds.



Figure 4. American Educational Research Journal and other scholarly journals published by the American Educational Research Association.

As I suggested with the example of Frederick Erickson, journal editors—and by extension, their editorial boards—can make a big difference in the kinds of articles published under their watch. All journals have an overarching mission and scope, and it is important to understand that mission and scope in deciding whether a particular journal is a good fit for your work. *AERJ*'s mission, for example, is to publish:

...original empirical and theoretical studies and analyses in education. The editors seek to publish articles from a wide variety of academic disciplines and substantive fields; they are looking for clear and significant contributions to the understanding and/or improvement of educational processes and outcomes. (<http://aer.sagepub.com/>)

This is a fairly general statement, but as a junior scholar, it seemed to me that *AERJ* would not be interested in the kind of qualitative work I do with Indigenous schools and communities; this seemed to be a journal more oriented toward a positivist,

quantitative paradigm, and rarely did I see scholarship on Native Americans published in this journal.

I nonetheless have always been a regular *AERJ* reader, and several years ago, in one issue I noticed a call for papers for a special issue on “Democracy and Education.” The editor at the time was Professor Linda McNeil, a strong advocate for research guided by concerns with social justice.

At the time, I and a colleague at the University of Arizona, Professor K. Tsianina Lomawaima, were working on exactly these issues of democracy and education with regard to Native American education. This special issue appeared to be an ideal opportunity to get our scholarship out to a wider audience and to move Native American education issues from the periphery to the center of scholarly debates. We wanted those 25,000 readers to attend to Native American education issues. We mustered our courage and submitted an abstract in response to Editor McNeil’s call, and she soon wrote back, encouraging us to develop the manuscript. Like Erickson, McNeil provided a discursive space for our ideas —a supportive combination of mentoring and constructive critique. Following an external peer review and some revisions, our article was published in the special issue, and it ultimately became the basis for a coauthored book published by Teachers College Press in 2006 (Figure 5).

So the lesson here is to take advantage of calls for special issues, feature sections of journals, and the like, which offer

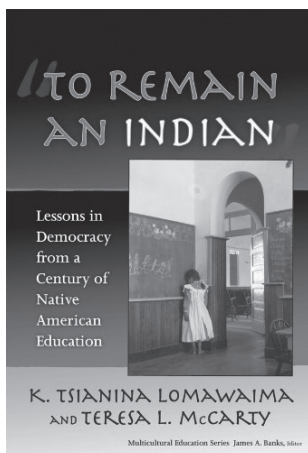


Figure 5. “To Remain an Indian”: *Lessons in Democracy from a Century of Native American Education*, the book that grew out of a manuscript published in a special issue of *AERJ*.

unique opportunities to highlight our work, often in venues where it might not be heard or seen. Editors and editorial review boards have the latitude to create these opportunities, and often, special issues, precisely because they are focused on a particular topic or problem, become core course texts. This is a significant “ripple effect” of the academic publication process.

I would like to close my remarks by inviting you into the world of *AERJ* and our editorial team’s vision for our term as editors. *AERJ* has two sections: the Social and Institutional Analysis (SIA) section, which I edit, and Teaching, Learning, and Human Development (TLHD), edited by Professor Harry O’Neil of the University of Southern California. Each section has a separate editorial board of 50-or-so members whose expertise reflects the mission and scope of that section.

This raises the sixth point I would like to emphasize: To engage in dialogue we need to understand the contours, textures, and parameters of the dialogic space —who are the voices, the readers, the writers, and those who edit their work. *AERJ*-SIA, for example, publishes:

...significant political, cultural, social, economic, and organizational issues in education [including] broad contextual and organizational factors affecting teaching and learning, the links between those factors and the nature and processes of schooling, and the ways that such “external” domains are conceptualized in research, policy, and practice. (<http://www.sagepub.com/journals/Journal201851/manuscriptSubmission#tabview=aimsAndScope>)

AERJ-TLHD, on the other hand, publishes:

...research articles that explore the processes and outcomes of teaching, learning, and human development at all educational levels and in both formal and informal settings. This section also welcomes policy research related to teaching, learning, and learning to teach. It publishes articles that represent a wide range of academic disciplines and use a variety of research methods. (<http://www.sagepub.com/journals/Journal201851/manuscriptSubmission#tabview=aimsAndScope>)



Figure 6. *AERA Open*, the new rapid review-and-dissemination online-only journal published by the American Educational Research Association

Authors who conduct or are interested in these kinds of research are *AERJ*'s intended audience. But there is another component of this dialogic space, and that is the vision of the editor or editors, and by extension, the editorial board.

Editors, associate editors, and their editorial boards are responsible for articulating a vision for their editorial term. The role of the editorial board is to help construct and guide a vision for the editorial term, typically announced in an editorial statement at the beginning of the term. For example, in the February 2014 issue of *AERJ*, we outlined this vision for our editorial term:

...we are committed to publishing the highest quality social, cultural, humanistic, and institutional analyses of education... reflective of diverse perspectives and constituencies... [guided by] the belief that education research should “build fundamental theory while at the same time addressing practical problems in the world...” (McCarty et al., 2014, pp. 4-5)

Specific issues — dialogues — that our editorial team would like to engage are also published in our Editorial Statement:

- *Superdiversity*: How is super-diversity configured across social contexts, and how are schools, communities, and nation-states responding to these global phenomena? What are the implications for equity and social justice in education?

- *Social difference in education*: How are ethnic, linguistic, racial, and other forms of social difference constructed as a problem or a resource, and with what implications for educational access, opportunity, and equity?
- *Language education policy*: What role does educational language policy play in structuring schools and society?
- *Youth studies*: How do children and youth experience these processes and what lessons can be drawn from youth experiences to inform education policy and practice?

These questions lead us to broader research perspectives, which, while not necessarily new to AERJ-SIA, we wish to highlight in our editorship:

- critical race studies,
- critical language studies (particularly language education policy and planning),
- Indigenous, feminist, humanist, decolonizing, and interdisciplinary approaches,
- Critical ethnography,
- The moral, ethical, and advocacy dimensions of education policymaking and leadership.

This, then, is the dialogic space we wish to foster within *AERJ-SIA*. I hope that many who attended this conference will be able to locate your work within that space. And this raises the seventh point I would like to highlight: It is important to read the editors' Editorial Statements and consider how your work might contribute to that editorial vision. We are looking for fresh, interesting, quality analyses of timely issues in the complex field of education!

I will close by sharing the announcement of a new dialogic space for academic publishing in education—a solely online, open access journal *AERA* will launch this year, *AERA Open* (Figure 6). I hope you will check out the Web site and consider contributing to this rapid review, rapid dissemination international journal.

This brings me to my final point: As researchers and writers working in a globalizing, digital age, we need to explore and create new dialogic spaces where, to return to Professor López's words in that email exchange with which I began, we can “exchange ideas, innovate, and leave a legacy for the next generation.” That is our

purpose, and I hope this presentation will be helpful in fostering that infinitely generative, fascinating, and important scholarly endeavor.

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