

Open Access:

An international case study

This short reflection note will present some views about Open Access by focusing on a peer-reviewed journal that I launched in 1996.



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THE MEDITERRANEAN JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL STUDIES (MJES)

is a biannual peer-reviewed international journal with a regional focus, founded under the auspices of the Euro-Mediterranean Centre for Educational Research (EMCER) at the University of Malta. The journal features educational research carried out in Mediterranean countries, as well as studies related to the diaspora of Mediterranean people worldwide. It draws on a range of academic disciplines and sub-disciplines, including comparative education, critical social science, policy analysis, Mediterranean studies, cultural and post-colonial studies, intercultural education, peace education, and migrant studies. Over the years, the journal has offered a forum for debate, facilitating dialogue in a region that has vibrant and varied educational traditions. There is a strong international dimension to this dialogue, given the profile of the Mediterranean in the configuration of the new world order, recent developments in the Arab world, and the presence of Mediterranean peoples in Europe, North America and elsewhere.

Initially, the *MJES* was produced in print format, and sold internationally to individual

and institutional subscribers. From the start, the project could probably best be described as a labour of love, having all the characteristics of a cottage industry. Seed funding was made available by the University of Malta, and complemented by subscriptions. Much of the work was done by volunteers. Academic credentials were ensured by a network of international referees, and by reputable patrons who agreed to feature on the journal's regional and international editorial boards. Key among these was the late Pierre Bourdieu, whose humble origins in rural Béarn made him sympathetic to projects from other peripheries and semi-peripheries of this world. The late Edward Said's support was also immensely influential in ensuring the journal's legitimacy in the Arab region. Efforts by heavyweight publishers to 'adopt' the journal once its subscription base was guaranteed were resisted, for fear that some of the founding principles underpinning the journal would be jeopardised.

One of these principles was the establishment of variable subscription rates, with lower fees for developing countries. In time, however, the editorial board realised that most of the journal's subscribers were actually from North America, Europe, and Australasia, with very few subscriptions from individuals and universities in the Middle East and North Africa, or from the global South more generally. In 2007 a decision was made to produce the journal online, and

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to make it available free, through Open Access (OA). The print version was discontinued, except in the case of special thematic issues.

The switch to OA entailed a number of decisions that have had various implications for the journal. The editorial board opted to continue running the journal in-house, using Content Management Systems (CMS) software made available by our University. Another option would have been to benefit from the Open Journal Systems (OJS) platform that was then already handling over 2500 journals. OJS is part of the Public Knowledge Project led by a consortium of higher education institutions including Stanford University and the University of British Columbia. Fees are charged, with rates varying on whether or not advertisements are accepted by the journal. In hindsight, this might have been a better option, given the range of functions built into the OJS, including search facilities and wider international exposure. It would have also facilitated better exploitation of the opportunities afforded by online technology, including, for instance, hot links between key terms, authors and references. All this is of course possible with our own CMS, but activation of all these features requires a team of dedicated specialists willing to work on a voluntary basis — hard to come by anywhere, and most of all in a country the size of Malta, which only has one university, catering for 12000 students.

Despite the limitations imposed by the lack of an economy of scale, the journal has survived the transition from print to a web-based environment. Indeed, the number of academics from the Mediterranean rim and beyond who requested to be put on the journal's email list serve has increased exponentially since 2007, as have submissions. Our CMS enables tracking of both the number of hits and downloads, as well as the location of those browsing our journal pages. The range of countries that appear in the monthly reports generated by the system is much broader than that which featured in the subscription database prior to the shift online.

Switching to OA has not had any impact on the quality of the articles published. Papers are

obviously still refereed, and it is rare that an article is accepted without going through one or two iterations at least. We have opted to maintain the same visual print style, both to ensure continuity with earlier issues, and to satisfy authors who, generally speaking, still prefer to see their work in 'traditional' format. In addition, thematic issues are published as paperbacks thanks to a special arrangement we have with an international publisher and distributor. This means that authors' work appears in both online and print formats, as an article in a special issue, and as a chapter in a volume. Costs to the journal are limited to 'type-setting'.

A number of challenges remain. Authors are increasingly sensitive to issues such as the journal's impact factor, a feature we have not taken into account not only for technical but also for ideological reasons. Being on the periphery of the major academic journal publishers also

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means that benefits associated with citation indexes, for instance, are harder to exploit. Commercially, it probably pays to allow oneself to be absorbed by the large academic publishers specialising in journals. However, the new technology actually provides ample possibilities for 'maverick' journals such as ours to establish an international presence, and to fulfil a distinctive role in disseminating knowledge at no cost to the user. This resonates with some of the interesting movements that we see taking shape around us, including, for instance, the academic boycott of large publishing houses that charge exorbitant subscription fees (*The Guardian*, 2012).

Certainly, the OA movement holds much promise not only in democratising knowledge, but also in providing the environment to radically transform the world of academic publishing. ●

References

The Guardian (2012) Scientists sign petition to boycott academic publisher Elsevier. 2 February 2012. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2012/feb/02/academics-boycott-publisher-elsevier>.