

Ethical Issues for an Editorial Board: *Kairaranga*



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The *Kairaranga* Editorial Board¹ is mindful of, and has been discussing, ethical issues. At the November 2007 board meeting, the author was invited to speak to the editorial board about ethical issues of interest to the board. This paper covers some of the issues discussed in the presentation. The article is being published in *Kairaranga* as the Editorial Board feel it would be useful to document a paper on ethical issues, and this will support ongoing discussions between authors and editing teams to ensure that articles are ethically robust.

ABSTRACT

With academic journals, we think of the ethical aspects of the research contained in the articles rather than with the journal itself. However, journal editing has its own set of ethical concerns, which this article addresses. One is ensuring that the anonymity of institutions and participants, in research and the reporting of practice, is preserved. Another is to ensure a clear separation between “owner” of the journal and the editorial judgement, so that editorial independence is preserved. This defence of free speech is especially important when a journal, its editorial board and contributors, are variously associated with a government agency or Board of Trustees.

Position paper

Keywords

Ethics, informed consent, professional practice, publications, research ethics

INTRODUCTION

Editing a journal can be a demanding task. Considerable time lapses between the receipt of a manuscript for consideration and its appearance in published form. Between first and last there is reviewing to be done, which on some occasions is effortless and on others, not. Contributions have to be formatted, proofed, collated and then sent to the printer. Finally, the finished journal appears: contributors are delighted to see their article in print and those who have produced it heave a sigh of relief with getting one issue out of the way as they gear up to begin the process all over again with the next issue.

Now, if publishing journals were simply a technical matter then life would be so much easier for those who either contribute to, or produce them. But, as with all human affairs, ethics has a habit of intruding on our activities and

placing constraints on our conduct, and journals are no exception to this. This is especially so of journals devoted to reporting on aspects of what we humans get up to. There is, I suggest, a common core of ethical concerns surrounding journals which contributors and editors alike need to be aware of. In addition, some journals have particular characteristics which entail further ethical duties beyond the common core, and *Kairaranga* is one such journal.

ETHICAL POSITIONS

As a starting point for considering the ethics of journal editing, we could begin with thinking more clearly about three general positions on ethical deliberation. The first is *teleological*: to determine, according to a principle, whether an act is right or wrong, what matters are the consequences – an act is right if it promotes more good than harm and wrong if it produces greater harm than good. For the ethical egoist, it is what is good for me; for the utilitarian, it is the greatest good (happiness) for the greatest number, bearing in mind that the legitimate interests of some might be sacrificed for the greater good of others (Mills, 1962). The second is *deontological*: to determine, according to a principle, whether an act is right or wrong is given by the inherent nature of the principle. It is the right thing to do regardless of the consequences, for it is my duty to act in this way or it is a just thing to do (Kant, 1964). The third, *virtues*, is grounded in human qualities. A morally good person is one who displays virtues (for example, honesty, care) and eschews vices (for example, greed, envy) (Aristotle, 1993). Few of us locate our moral life in just one of these positions. Sometimes we anguish as we weigh up the consequences; other times we act out of firm conviction that this is the right thing to do (or not do); on occasions we applaud the virtuous person for their example.

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

Ethical principles are few in number, general in nature, and rather universal in their application. While other principles have been proposed, for our purposes, those principles identified by Snook and McGeorge (1978) will serve us well enough, if for no other reason than they are located in a New Zealand context of ethical decision-making and do provide sound direction. The principles are:

- minimise the harm you cause
- maximise the good you do

¹ The *Kairaranga* Editorial Board is currently a collaborative partnership with representatives from three sectors – Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLb); Ministry of Education, Special Education; and tertiary.

- be fair to all concerned
- have some concern with truth
- do not unnecessarily impede others in their pursuits. (p. 16)

Other principles which could be added to the above include personal autonomy and justice.

These are good maxims for sound ethical conduct, but they need to be cashed out into ethical rules if we are to live our lives in an ethical sort of way. “Maximise the good you do” may be good advice, but how we do this in any particular situation is open to judgement. From a principle we can extract any number of rules and often these will be in conflict. Hence, the moral dilemma for the individual or the moral conflict between individuals (as well as groups, nations and the like).

A further set of concepts, which cut across this framework, have particular relevance to the ethics of journal editing. These are often presented as dualisms but in nature they are continuums. The first concerns objectivity and subjectivity, the second, absolute and relative.

Can ethical judgements be, in some sense, *objective* or are they merely expressions of *subjective*, personal preference? In the aesthetic realm of value, we say such things as “This is a good painting but it does not appeal to me” or “I like this song even though it’s not particularly good.” Here, we distinguish between what we like as a personal preference, which says something about our subjective state, and qualities about that object being good according to some criteria, which raises judgement beyond subjectivity by appealing to something more objectively inherent in the properties of the painting or song. Likewise, ethical judgement rises above more subjective liking/disliking to claim an objective edge. Quite what this is remains open to debate.

The second contrast is between the *absolute* and the *relative*. The former expresses the view that there is but one account of what is morally good or right such that opposing views are wrong. There is some merit to this, for all of us have some fundamental ethical beliefs so dear to us that they would be the very last we would give up, and in doing so we would forgo our humanity. Yet there are problems with an absolute stance. What if two absolute principles conflict? Take “Always tell the truth” and “Never cause harm to others” – what to say to a killer seeking a particular victim whose whereabouts I know? Do I tell the truth, and the victim is harmed, or do I tell a lie in order to prevent harm to the victim? We cannot have it both ways. Other things being equal, harm outweighs truth. And all too often we are prepared to write in exceptions, but how far down the slippery slope do we go before at some point we draw a line? So, being somewhat liberally inclined we accept ethical pluralism – each to his or her own, live and let live – but this comes at a price, for the spectre of relativism looms. If all views are equal such that none can be judged better or worse, one’s own included, then there is no rational justification for us to prefer our own views over any other, so paralysis rules. Or, less severely, if we are moved by the virtue of tolerance (accept or put up

with something even if we find it disagreeable), then how far do we countenance intolerance – does anything go, or to what extent should the tolerant tolerate the intolerant who have no tolerance for the tolerant? Most of us draw the line somewhere between what we will tolerate and that which we will not.

So, as we move to consider some quite explicit ethical concerns of journal editing, we do need to ask to what extent our reflections are grounded in teleological, deontological and virtue assumptions and the degree to which we verge towards the subjective or objective, the absolute or the relative.

ETHICAL PRACTICE: *KAIRARANGA*

In considering the ethics of journal editing as this bears on *Kairaranga*, a helpful starting point is to outline what the journal is about, what it will publish and how it will review contributed material. An editorial (Watts, Nobilo, Annan, Davies & Margrain, 2007) states the purpose of *Kairaranga* clearly enough: ‘the promotion of effective practice and relevant research in special education’ (p. 2). The following will be considered:

- *practice papers* ‘celebrating effective practice and implementation of programmes’
- *position papers* ‘outlining an author’s view on a current educational issue’
- *research papers* ‘summarising research studies involving quantitative and/or qualitative analysis of data or reviews of literature’
- *storied experience papers* ‘reporting the experiences of children, parents, caregivers, teachers, support staff and professionals in various learning settings’ (adapted from *Kairaranga* Editorial Board, 2007, p. 52).

Kairaranga is a “blind” peer review journal such that ‘neither the name of the author nor the name of the reviewer will be known to each other’ (*Kairaranga* Editorial Board, p. 52). Noted also is a disclaimer: ‘Views expressed or implied in this journal are not necessarily the views of the Editorial Board, Ministry of Education or the New Zealand RTL Association’ (p. 53).

ETHICAL ISSUES

With all of this behind us, we can now move on to explore some ethical issues involved in editing *Kairaranga*. I do so from three vantage points: first I am a philosopher with a particular interest in ethics; second, I am the Vice-Chancellor’s nominee on the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC); third, I am a joint editor of *Delta*. I shall draw off this to shape the account to come. I have also taken the opportunity to peruse some recent issues of *Kairaranga* and will use several examples to illustrate the ethical points being made.

Empirical studies

A key ethical concern regarding empirical studies, be they practice papers, storied experience or reported research, is preserving the anonymity of the participants, except in just those cases where the participants, have given their informed

consent to be publicly identified in the writing up and publication of the study. In many cases of quantitative inquiry, the aggregated data is such that individuals cannot be identified; but this is less clear-cut with more qualitative investigations. Either way, anonymity can be protected by giving a school or a person a pseudonym along with avoiding descriptive words of geography, status, etc., which may lead to identification. In six articles in one issue of *Kairaranga*, institutions are clearly identified by author affiliation (and 'my school' in the text) or mentioned by name in the article. For example, Morris and Katon (2006) do both; so too do Hirannah and Mahoney (2006), Wilson and Evans (2006), Naidoo and Maicker (2006), Mears and Stevenson (2006) and Ellery and Trafford (2006). If the research has been through a robust ethical appraisal process, such as that undertaken by Massey University's Human Ethics Committee, then the schools' Boards of Trustees (BOT) would be required to give written consent to the research being undertaken, such that the BOTs are aware of and willing to approve the public identification of their schools. Some journals require confirmation of proper ethical clearance. In *Kairaranga's* case, an accompanying letter of consent from the management of schools or early childhood services should suffice to allay any concerns. It is important that the Kairaranga Editorial Board keeps records that such consent was gained from schools, early childhood services and participants, and that authors indicate within the article that consent was gained. Otherwise anonymity must prevail.

A related ethical worry lies in the anonymity of individuals. Identification of a school, class level, year and so on can sometimes lead to a rather good guess as to the identity of a teacher and/or student(s) and the Editorial Board does need to be vigilant to this possibility. For example, Bourne (2007) provides her institutional affiliation and then discusses the case of a particular child, who is Māori, with ADD and who arrived at the institution several years earlier. Not many children fit this set of descriptive characteristics. The child is initially named as "Aroha" (with quotation marks) but subsequently Aroha (without them). The quotation marks imply a pseudonym but a note to this effect, as is standard practice, would put the matter to rest. Whether the pseudonym, in this instance, would preserve anonymity is, of course, an open question. In fact, "Aroha" was a compilation of several case studies and thus no single individual existed with the specific situation described in that early childhood centre. Nevertheless, the Editorial Board needs to be alert to protecting the identity of participants and clear in alerting readers to how this has been done. In the absence of an independent peer review process undertaken by authors, responsibility does fall on to the Editorial Board to undertake stronger ethical oversight than would normally be required of editorial boards which publish more traditional academic journal articles. It is a common experience of MUHEC to find that practitioners reporting on their own practice tend to fall a little short of grasping the many ethical demands that research on teachers and students place on them. This is usually through ignorance rather than deliberate malpractice (of not always seeing that the "researcher hat" has to replace the "teacher hat" over access, consent, and so forth). Conflict of interest can be reduced to a considerable extent by

recognising that the ethical constraints on seeking permission to research teachers/students in another school are equally applicable to one's research on one's own students. This is usually picked up and rectified by the MUHEC process.

When the Editorial Board is of the view that a submitted article has not been subject to prior ethical review, then it is incumbent on the Board to obtain from the author(s) such confirmation as is required to allow the identification of an institution or person. With more formal research articles, confirmation of ethical approval can be requested as part of the review process (for example, MUHEC allocates a unique identifier to each successful application which can be checked with the Ethics Office if need be).

Position papers

Position papers give rise to a rather different set of ethical problems. Whereas empirical studies describe an actual state of affairs, position papers outline 'a writer's view on a current educational issue' (Kairaranga Editorial Board, 2007, p. 52). A point of view expresses an opinion, judgement, evaluation and the like, and in doing so it tends to be rather more prescriptive by conveying an account of what could, should or ought to be. In short, an expressive position paper is likely to present a coherent argument to justify the position advanced on a particular educational issue. It seems reasonable, in this regard, to distinguish between those authors who are employed by the Ministry of Education and those who are not. To start with the latter first. Authors employed by universities (and other tertiary education institutions) have a legislated right to be "the critic and conscience of society" and to perform this duty, and to perform it well, requires the intellectual freedom to pursue an argument to its logical conclusion. Short of libel, incomprehension or objectionable language, there seems to be no rational ground for the Editorial Board of *Kairaranga* to censor opinion contrary to its own or that of the Ministry of Education. The general principle of free speech extends in the same way to others, such as parents, teachers and the like. The disclaimer is protection enough for *Kairaranga* and its Editorial Board.

Teachers, whether they be general classroom or early childhood practitioners or resource teacher, have the same general right to free speech as their academic colleagues, except in one relevant respect. There is no reason for such teachers not to express a point of view on some aspect of interest to them; the restitution comes only if reference is made to their own situation that things written about their own institution identify the institution. It is probably prudent to exclude identifying reference to one's own location in a position paper.

Employees of the Ministry of Education enjoy the some general right to intellectual liberty, except in one relevant respect. As citizens, they, like all others, possess the right to express a view on all manner of issues without Ministry restraint. This includes opinions on any and all government policy which does not fall within the purview of the Ministry. However, as employees of the Ministry of Education, on matters of educational policy, the right to free speech is

curtailed. To be sure, in the formulation and evaluation of education policy, Ministry officials no doubt do express their views, sometimes robustly, but this debate is private, in-house, and not for public consumption. Once policy is determined by the government of the day, officials have a duty to implement it and not publicly criticise it. However, one could resign in order to further dissenting opinion. On the other hand, on educational matters about which there is no official policy, or no policy in the making, then there is no good reason to deny a Ministry of Education employee the same right as any other individual to pass comment. If the editorial board is persuaded of the rightness of this position then it has a duty to defend it in the face of arguments to the contrary.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

In addressing the ethics of editing *Kairaranga*, we cannot avoid considering the Ministry of Education and what its proper role might be in regard to two matters: the contributions from ministry employees and the determination of editorial policy.

From the previous discussion, a general principle can be derived for the limits placed on the ministry in relation to monitoring, approving and censoring the contributions of its employees. On matters other than education, no interference is justified. On descriptions of empirical states of affairs, likewise. However, the ministry does have a legitimate interest in ensuring that the views employees publicly express about policy are consistent with the policy itself. Public servants are employed to implement government policy, and are employed on this understanding, so it would be a contradiction to both undertake to implement the policy yet express a contrary view to the stated policy, such a contradiction to be resolved, generally, in favour of the policy. The question to be asked is this: what role should the Ministry of Education exercise when employees write position papers for submission to *Kairaranga*? Here there will be disagreement but I would advocate a light touch rather than a heavy hand. Persuasion rather than coercion ought to prevail. Encourage authors to have trusted colleagues read their manuscript for advice; line managers, at most, should do no more than counsel authors to bear in mind the strictures on critique of policy and the likely consequences for doing so. There is no place for censorship prior to publication, however well-meaning more senior colleagues might be. If prudence and good sense on the part of the author are absent, and publication proceeds with predictable consequences, then and only then are there justifiable grounds for the ministry holding an employee to account.

The second matter surrounding Ministry of Education involvement with *Kairaranga* lies in ownership of the journal and what, if anything, this implies for editorial control. The Editorial Board consists of members drawn from a triumvirate partnership of: RTL; Ministry of Education, Special Education staff; and academics. However the proprietorial rights over the journal are less clear. Who owns the journal; who has the final call on its affairs? Here are some more questions, and there may be

others. Should the Ministry of Education have any role to play in determining which of its staff should serve on the Editorial Board of *Kairaranga*? Should the Ministry have a general right to intervene in the shaping of the editorial policy of the journal? Should the Ministry be permitted to exercise an over-riding veto on material published in the journal? To each of these three questions the answer must be "No", thrice. This is not to suggest that, as a matter of fact, the ministry has ever acted in these ways, but only to assert that it ought not do so.

CONCLUSION

The founders of *Kairaranga*, in an interview (Hickman, 2006), stated: 'the *Kairaranga* journey is likely to be a long one, and its evolution and progression will occur over a much longer period than a single year' (p. 3). Exploring the ethics of journal editing is one small part of this journal of discovery, but with a difference. Some elements of editing and publishing a journal, being technical, can be settled relatively easily, and here one can think of journal style, format, readership and the like. But contributors and contributions are far less predictable; an ethical response is often required. But ethics is not a simple matter of a formula, a rule or an axiom. Ethical deliberation is complex, often gives rise to disagreement, and sometimes eludes final consensus. The ethics of journal editing shares these characteristics and how the editorial board grapples with the sometimes conflicting demands of, for example, seeking truth, avoiding harm, and gaining trust needs to be worked out in an open, transparent and honest way.

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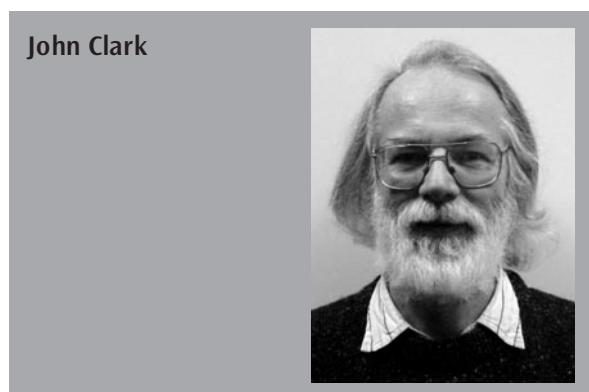
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