Editorial: Freedom of Speech in Academic Publishing

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Academic journals hold an important place in academic life and contribute to the formation of a scholarly community of inquiry. But they are not immune from controversy. Their importance is evident in their capacity to become targets of animosity, embroiled in controversy, and caught in disciplinary rivalries and unresolved intellectual disputes. Academic journals are not merely neutral reports, but carefully curated collections of research—subjected to rigorous peer review and reflecting key disciplinary disputes, directions, and quandaries that characterize a given field at a given moment of time.

The stakes are high. That’s why in this and future introductions, I will discuss the changing landscape of academic publishing—especially as it relates to academic freedom—by commenting on different ways research and writing are compromised and how our community can better protect both.

First, consider the extent to which academic journals have been complicit in the opioid epidemic. For decades, numerous titles have published research that has promoted highly addictive prescription drugs—questionable research that may have contributed to more than 200,000 deaths in the United States and some 14,000 in Canada (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; Wright, 2019). Medical researchers Rummans et al. (2018) note that the abuse of prescription pain medication is “now more prevalent than common medical diseases such as diabetes, and is 1.5 times more prevalent than all cancer diagnoses combined” (p. 345).

In publishing opioid-related research, some journals have inadequately regulated or monitored the influence of pharmaceutical corporations in clinical trials and have inadequately acknowledged the role of corporate funding. Many publications have minimized the addictive properties of these drugs, leading doctors to prescribe them more often and in greater quantities than advisable. In 2018, the Mayo Clinic reviewed questionable pro-opioid research, going back to 1986. It found that a half-dozen academic journals had downplayed the addictive properties of opioids (Rummans et al., 2018). That recent study also shows how a pro-opioid piece in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, published in 1980, was referenced 600 times by other peer-reviewed journals over the next 37 years. Indeed, doctors could draw on a large number of journal articles to justify their prescriptions. However, few of those 600 publications mentioned that the original *NEJM* publication was a letter—not a peer-reviewed research article (Leung et al., 2017).

One cannot overstate the role of academic journals in the opioid crisis, which raises significant legal and ethical questions of culpability. It also prompts all of us scholars to urgently rethink the social and political impact of academic publishing.

Questionable opioid research is but one example of commercial interests exerting significant influence on the content of academic journals. Sometimes, however, the external influence comes from governments and may actually take on the form of self-censorship. Many Western academics are unwilling to publish research that is critical of China, a self-imposed censorship due to fears they will never be allowed into that country again—or worse (Fish, 2018). Occasionally, the pressure is more overt. In 2017, the Chinese Communist Party requested that Cambridge University Press direct one of its journals, *The China Quarterly*, to remove any publication from its journal archives that referenced anything that didn't comply with the party's views (Redden, 2017a). The Press complied, blocking over 300 *The China Quarterly* articles that mentioned Tiananmen, Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong, the Communist Party, the Cultural Revolution, and so on. This not only meant that hundreds of already published articles were no longer available but also sent a chilling message to scholars and editors around the world. This intrusion into the world of English-language academic publishing provoked a defense of academic freedom: a large international protest, including a petition signed by hundreds of scholars (Balding, 2017), persuaded the Press to reverse its decision and refuse to comply with the Communist Party's request (Redden, 2017b). This reversal might not have happened were the publisher privately owned and the leadership less committed to academic freedom—a good argument for maintaining connections with academic institutions. In commenting on the decision made by the Press, the journal editor Tim Pringle provided a compelling defense of academic freedom: “It is not the role of respected global publishing houses such as CUP to hinder such access” (as cited in Else, 2017, para. 10).

Commitments to academic freedom should always outweigh such external pressures. It is imperative, then, that journals remain autonomous, with supportive connections to academic institutions, so that they might serve the public good—even if it means running against powerful vested interests. In his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the German philosopher and social theorist Jürgen Habermas (1989) argues that the Enlightenment and all that came with it—liberalism, democracy, freedom of speech—had its origin in the public sphere, created through the emergence of an independent press and the “public use of reason.” Rigorous academic publishing continues to serve that same function: creating and advancing a vibrant scholarly community where truth, facts, and evidence are assembled into coherent, well-reasoned arguments, and are subjected to honest debate, critique, revision, and modification.

This journal continues that important tradition. *Brock Education* has published dozens of issues, in print and online. The current issue includes a number of timely pieces:

In “‘Voluntarily, Knowingly, and Intelligently’: Protecting Informed Consent in School-Based Mental Health Referrals,” Jan DeFehr (2019) shows how school-based mental health literacy typically excludes scholarly critiques, which has led to “an illusion of disciplinary consensus” (p. 4). She argues that psychiatry “lacks scientific evidence of pathology despite at least 70 years of research” (p. 6). What's more, she explains, “diagnostic manuals design psychiatric diagnosis to endure throughout the lifespan and although mental disorder diagnosis can open doors, it can

also be used against students many years after diagnosis is initially documented” (p. 6). DeFehr (2019) also considers the “potential for dependence, adverse, and harmful effects” or psychiatric drugs that “exert no disease-specific action but rather act on the central nervous system to superimpose a state of intoxication that may or may not be noticeable or helpful” (p. 4). DeFehr (2019) is “concerned that educators may be facilitating student referral to mental health professionals on the basis of misleading and incomplete information” (p. 4). She questions whether mental illness is like any other illness in terms of biological evidence, in the sense that there is “no scan, x-ray, or test of fluids or tissues available for any psychiatric diagnosis” (p. 7), and asks whether the marketing departments of pharmaceutical companies are responsible for the acceptance of pharmacological interventions. Her second concern is that school-based mental health interventions assume informed consent: schools tend to consider a student’s attendance at an appointment as implied consent for diagnosis, even as most clients are unaware that assessments and referrals are often made quickly. Most problematically, a diagnosis is kept on file for one’s lifetime and may be necessary to disclose in the future, thereby impacting opportunities in ways clients have not fully considered. In other words, she argues that even as psychiatric diagnosis is less “evidence based” than other medicine, it results in a consequential permanent record.

We live in an age of growing recognition of mental health issues among students—along with growing mental health interventions. But DeFehr (2019) emphasizes the importance of promoting awareness while avoiding blanket prognosis: “It is crucial that discussions of student well-being not only refrain from disseminating unsubstantiated claims, but it is also important that educators counter the profoundly flawed assumption that difficult, strange, or extreme emotions and behaviours are manifestations of physiological pathology” (p. 16). (DeFehr discusses her paper in our Meet the Authors, available here:

<https://journals.library.brocku.ca/brocked/index.php/home/meet-the-authors.>)

In “Doing Science: Pre-service Teachers’ Attitudes and Confidence Teaching Elementary Science and Technology,” Susan Docherty-Skippen, Doug Karrow, and Ghazala Ahmed (2019) consider how “early elementary science and technology (S&T) education experiences with hands-on experimentation and inquiry-based learning impact pre-service teachers’ attitudes and confidence to teach S&T education” (p. 24). Interviews with 27 pre-service teachers, participating in an elementary methods course in Ontario, indicate that those taught S&T through hands-on experimentation exhibit more positive attitudes toward S&T. The authors aim to move beyond the “traditional economic or utilitarian line of thought” (p. 26), which they recognize as modernist, instrumental, and characterized by an “encounter nature in a technological way that is delineating, calculating, and categorizing” (p. 26). The authors advocate for the inclusion of an ontological and postmodern perspective, founded on different metaphysical systems and ways of knowing, which “demands S&T be viewed as more contingent, less certain, more complex, tentative, emergent, and tolerant of the unknown” (p. 26). Their study “demonstrates that pre-service elementary teachers who were exposed to hands-on experimentation in their elementary S&T school years exhibit a more positive attitude toward S&T and are more confident to teach S&T” (p. 31).

Elsewhere in this issue, Christopher Holland examines climate-change education—its character and controversy. With “The Implementation of the Next Generation Science Standards and the

Tumultuous Fight to Implement Climate Change Awareness in Science Curricula,” Holland (2019) notes that teachers often promote views from both advocates and detractors—in the name of balance—despite overwhelming scientific consensus that climate change is happening and caused by human activity. Holland considers the Truth in Textbooks coalition, a group organized by a former United States Army Lieutenant that analyzes high school textbooks and advocates for the inclusion of biblical perspectives on evolution and climate. This misrepresents and misdirects teaching on climate change, Holland argues. The coalition promotes the notion that climate change is normal and natural, caused by things like volcanos and a changing orbit, and argues that science-based discussions on the topic unnecessarily frighten and alarm people. In this way, the group stands in contrast to the Next Generation Science Standards—developed by educators, scientists, policy makers, and Nobel Laureates—that promote “a more evidence-based, hands-on learning pedagogy” (p. 44). Holland concludes with several recommendations and policy prescriptions that tackle entrenched resistance to engaging debates about climate change in schools.

And in “Beyond Schools: Community-Based Experiences as a Third Space in Teacher Education,” Melanie Janzen and Christie Petersen (2019) describe practicum experiences that balance theory and practice by combining coursework and field experience—something most teacher education programs do in Canada. Their article aims to broaden that pedagogical approach by exposing students to other experiential opportunities, such as community organizations. They offer a case study that examines student experiences and challenges future teachers to disrupt the “belief that teaching is a matter of technical expertise” (p. 54). This leads to a discussion of a “third space” in teaching, which draws upon hybridity theory and allows for a more nuanced understanding of common boundaries in education: theory/practice, teacher/student, university/school. Community-based field experiences, the authors show, can challenge and transform such binary perspectives.

The current issue inaugurates some changes to the format of the journal, taking advantage of some developments in open source software. First, abstracts are provided on the home page of each issue in order to attract potential readers and allow them to more easily determine what they want to read. Clicking on article titles will now bring readers directly to articles. Second, the layout of the articles has also been modified to provide a more appealing visual layout. Last, as evident in this email, we have adopted a format that includes abstracts and links to the articles within the body of the email in order to allow readers to more easily click through to the articles. All of these changes aim to improve both the aesthetics and functionality of the journal by reducing the number of clicks necessary to access articles and keeping readers in the journal once they come in.

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In closing: Is research a form of disinterested inquiry that aims to promote understanding and open new horizons of thought and knowledge? Or must research serve predetermined aims, such as readily implementable solutions to specific problems? Our age of metrics seems to prefer the latter (Biesta, 2010). Education is a practical and professional field; it is also one that requires

disinterested and non-instrumental inquiry that troubles common assumptions and disrupts prevalent practices. Research can and often should be framed as disruption and interruption. The current issue of *Brock Education* contains research that does both.

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