

## Review

# A Critical Look at CJEC, Vol. 15. No. 1

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The first issue of this *Journal* in its new format arrived on my desk the other day looking smaller, more crisp and much less wrinkled than the old style. The sterile plastic package survived even our mailroom unblemished.

The contents centered on formative evaluation techniques available to the producers of teaching/learning materials. Formative evaluation seems to be any process applied to anything during the creation process. Summative evaluation seems to be any sort of criticism, informed or bloody minded, offered to the producer after the baby is born and the critique is obviously too late to do anybody but the critic any good. Perhaps the best explanation is by Bob Stake cited in Scriven in 1981b as referred to by Ragsdale in 1982: "When the cook tastes the soup, that's formative evaluation, when the guests taste the soup, that's summative evaluation" (Ragsdale, p. 71).

The basic idea gleaned from the detailed series of approaches and examples in the various articles seems to be that while there are a great many ways and means to consider, the prime point is that any sort of formative evaluation produces better results under testing than no formative processes at all. The most impressive results under test are related to what seem to be the most impressive methods of formative evaluation, whether computer, expert or sample-based. This is clear enough. "Good is better than evil because it's nicer" was a common comment by Mammy Yokum of the departed comic strip *Little Abner*. It seems to apply here. Certainly some cutting of the cloth to suit the customer is a clear example of conventional wisdom.

There is little point in rehashing the individual articles which discuss documented ways of formative evaluation. The general theme is so clear, the evidence so persuasive and the whole idea so obvious that one wonders how and/or why anybody would press on without some kind of formal formative evaluation anyway. The articles are concise, well illustrated and make the point that one expects from their titles and the general theme of the issue. One assumes that there was considerable formative evaluation involved in the creation of the articles themselves as well as in the production of the journal. At the risk of slipping into summative activities, this particular issue deserves a strong "attaboy"!

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Of more particular interest to this reader was the accompanying explanation of how the change in format from previous issues was brought about. The Editor expressed considerable fear that the result of all the effort would be difficult to read, in the sense of legibility rather than jargon. Two concerns were uppermost: first, that the unjustified right margin would prove awkward; and second, that the breakdown of text into the dreaded dot-matrix-syndrome in parts of the graphic visuals would prove unacceptable.

Like a trap-door spider, I leaped out of my door on the main corridor to the Resource Center and thrust the *Journal* under the startled noses of the first ten faculty members who happened along. This "person-in-a-hurry- interview" technique was complicated by the nearness of exams, the pressures of marking assignments and the universal reluctance to be quoted. At any rate the comments were similar, if not statistically reliable.

The startled sample liked the quality of the photographs, were annoyed at the level of print-through showing from the back of each page, and could not tell under the hall lighting whether the print was black on white, light brown on beige or black on faded yellow. Not one of the ten mentioned the unjustified right margin or the dot-matrix. When those two issues were pointed out to them, they indicated no particular problem with the margin in terms of being able to read the content easily, but were surprised to find that style in a journal (even though its presence had to be pointed out to them). Habit would seem to be a powerful force in perception. All of the ten were unhappy with the dot-matrix when an example was pointed out to them. One explained that she never looks at graphs anyway. Another complimented the Editors on all the neat boxes and arrows used here and there in the sampled pages. After this response, the researcher retired to the desk and the cold coffee cup.

A quick look at two texts which happened to be handy on the shelf revealed a lot of definitions based on the old typesetting problem of working out line length by playing with spaces to avoid a lot of hyphens. The Croy text states: ". . . there is little evidence to show that asymmetrical text setting would be generally acceptable to authors, publishers and the reading public, and it seems that rectangular composition will continue at the expense of slightly imperfect hyphenation" (Croy, p. 94). This comment does not help much since it is followed immediately by a statement which suggests that asymmetrical setting is often used for typewriter production of offset plates. "The work is aligned at the left-hand margin, but the lines are of unequal length. This is an economical form of production for short editions of reports, scientific papers, and other work which might otherwise might not be published" (Croy, p. 95).

The Croy text is, however, a 1972 revision of a 1968 edition. Things have changed since then. A 1982 book on designing text has no entry for "margins" and only two for "justification." The more important is in a section by James Hartley called "Designing Instructional Text" (Jonassen, p. 193), which seems to the point, even if the *CJEC* is not exactly what Hartley means by instructional text.

Hartley points out that unjustified type has a ragged right margin. It is like typescript in that there are equal spaces between words. Thus it would seem clear that readers who are familiar with processing large amounts of typewritten work should be inclined to accept unjustified lines with little difficulty. The sample of 10 mentioned earlier fall under this description, as would the majority of the *Journal's* readers. Perhaps the Editor and the production crew are the only ones who noticed the style anyway.

Hartley goes on to say that he recommends unjustified text because it allows more flexibility in deciding where to end each line. It is difficult to see how this comment applies to the layout of a journal page, whereas its application to instruction is easier to visualize. Hartley summarizes in two directions. On page 202 he notes: ". . . developments in computer- assisted typesetting will remove all of these chores (decisions communicated to typesetters). Computer programs have already been written which allow grammatical constraints to determine line-endings." Thus, one assumes, matters of style and design will be automated so editors will not have to lose sleep over them.

A more comforting note can be found in this final quotation from Hartley.

. . . we are opposed to the traditional method of balancing a text-- either vertically or horizontally--about a central axis on the page. We start from the top left, and we work down and across. We do not fill up the page with print just because the space is there. We use space as our main variable to clarify structure. (Jonassen, p. 202)

While being aware of the dangers of plucking neat quotations from the loving context in which they are embedded, Hartley certainly seems to be granting permission to use the unjustified margin where you want to for your own purposes. After all, if you put a ruler down the right edge of the *Journal* page, you will find that, except for final lines of paragraphs, there are not a lot of blank spaces anyway. One final note on this point is made by Linda Reynolds in her piece on "Display Problems in Teletext." On page 420 she points out: ". . . justification of the right-hand margin is very difficult to achieve . . . the value of right-hand justification is questionable . . ." (Jonassen, p. 420).

Perhaps we can agree that the issue of justification can remain a matter of habit and individual preference. It does not loom as a major barrier to comprehension for this reviewer. The dot-matrix breakup in visuals is another matter!

In a somewhat related context, Ragsdale mentions the "law of the hammer" which can be paraphrased as: "if you give someone a hammer who has never had one before, then quite suddenly there are an incredible number of things which need hammering and will get it" (Ragsdale, 1982).

The process of producing the new format for the *Journal* involved a Macintosh micro-computer in a crowded office, a neat bit of software, some typing students and access to some out-of-building fancy gadgets driven from self-produced disks. This desk-top publishing ability removes a major cost-related factor from the process of printed communication. In this case, the users are to be commended. The content is worth the effort needed to learn how to use the hammer. The problem, however, is that not all the stuff that can be published, should be published. Not all sentences are worth the stone into which they can now be so easily engraved--point proven.

We are all aware of the staggering amount of material that is out there. Many of us live in terror of committing something to public paper, only to find later that we, and our computer search, missed one obscure item that completely destroys our case. From this point of view, the last thing we need is an easier, faster, cheaper way for people to burst into print; thus adding to the rising tide of information that really should be processed when we have the time for it. Our own pearls of wisdom are, of course, free from this problem. Everything we produce is well worth reading; it's all those other writers we have to worry about. You know, the ones who never read, let alone revise, their own stuff and have a

kindly uncle on the editorial board. It seems clear that the ease of composition, revision and publication that the new hammers provide must be balanced by the need to look at the nails as well.

Perhaps we have left the age of the author and entered the age of the editor without noticing. The gatekeeper model of communication has been relocated. The "vanity press" model is now upon us in its newer, more threatening form. Our mailboxes, both paper and electronic, will runneth over for fair. If everybody and their graduate student can easily become their own publishers, how can the forces for good in the community support the desirable goal of everybody being their own editor before they use those shiny new hammers on us all?

Two examples from my recent experience support part of this concern. At the end of the term, our halls always burst into bloom with notices from students attempting to sell stereo equipment, sub-let hovels and scrounge rides westward. With the advent of computer labs and signmaking programs, most of these notices are now done with the help of expensive equipment installed for other purposes. The level of visual garbage is high. Some of the ads are so cluttered with stock images drawn from crib sheets that they could not be read easily even if one liked six fonts per page. Clearly we need to include basic message design into our shocked expressions of how badly students spell.

A second example cropped up in a recent student oral examination when the target of our attention went to great lengths to tell and show us how easy it was to draw on the program's image banks and scatter cute little cats all over the material being presented. We never did find out why she felt the scattering of cartoon figures would help comprehension. She was climbing image mountains, or perhaps sandboxes, simply because they were there.

Balancing this concern over the generous and counter-productive use of the prefab image with all the new work processing "goodies" is a state of related alarm over the book entitled, and the quotation is exact: *Complete School Communications Manual with Sample Letters, Forms, Bulletins, Policies and Memos--a unique time and work saver for today's school administrator*. Imagine a world where all of these things are pre-programmed into a system which makes it easy to print the cribnote out so that it looks like original work. It is already well known that major magazine publishers, lawyers and TV evangelists use "canned" materials from "time-saving" files, but if the tendency to use freeze-dried information spreads to memos and policies, then we have lost control indeed. The comments you get from a concerned school on your kid's progress may have been written in New Jersey. So much for individualization--at least they might get the student number correct more often.

The book is subtitled: "hundreds of effective communications on virtually every school situation from districts throughout the country, topically organized for quick access and ready for models or for copying." One is struck by the simplicity of it all. No more thinking is required. No more struggle with meaning is needed. No more striving for clarity is permitted. All is prewrapped; the "big mac" of communication is ready at the take-out window. With all of these advantages so easily at hand, why worry about malnutrition? The final touch is the entry of the pre-digested rules for "secret-societies"! I did not have the nerve to check the entry for "creative writing."

Enough of this viewing with alarm when pointing with pride is more to the point for the first issue of *CJEC* in the new format. The main point of all this is that the medium works with and for the message in this case. I look forward to more plastic packets from AMTEC.