
EDITORIAL POSTLUDE

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Adventures in Misplaced Mentoring

As listed in an appendix to this editorial, *JCA* has published a number of articles and commentaries of cautionary guides for researchers. But a more basic issue comes from lapses in the students' doctoral education, or, as one member of the editorial board once put it, the lost practice of student mentoring which also applies to the lost guidance for new junior faculty.

Long long ago, Kim Rotzoll greeted his new graduate research assistant with marching orders for the upcoming year. In addition to some minor short-run library searches, he asked the master's level student to see what would be needed to replicate and update a 20-year-old publication that was repeatedly cited as evidence that heavily advertised products were of greater quality. As often happens in such matters, it was not so simple: the original paper did not really study that issue, so the student returned with a proposal on what would be needed to actually assess the question. And thus it began.

After the data were collected and analyzed, the student was directed to read some issues of *Journal of Consumer Affairs* and then write up the data for a possible publication. "Put yourself as first author," Professor Rotzoll said. "I'll be a co-author because it was my idea." But his work did not end there. An outline of the paper was covered in red ink of comments, with notes to go back and read more articles from the journal for guidance on writing, organization, and style. Drafts of the manuscript were similarly red inked. In the end, the paper was not just his idea, but for the student who by now was in the doctoral program, it was a detailed education on how to approach writing a journal article that was accepted (for the final manuscript, see Rotfeld and Rotzoll 1976).

In that bygone day, rarely seen were research journal publications by business or communications students who were still taking classes. Today, some programs require that doctoral students publish a journal

article as a degree requirement. And yet, too many manuscripts today come to editors where the quality of faculty guidance is woefully weak or might not have existed at all, even when a senior faculty member is coauthor, or even senior author.

Too often, the ineluctable evidence of mentoring seems more akin to that found in an old joke in which a man recalls the day his father took him down to the river bank to teach him to swim. "To this day," the raconteur says with a chuckle, "I clearly remember the look of surprise on my father's face when I paddled to shore after managing to cut my way out of the sack." I sometimes wonder if the faculty-ranking author even looked at the manuscript beyond the title page when I notice mistakes or problems for which that same person had criticized others when reviewing for submissions to *JCA*.

In a broad expansive statement by a person prone to making broad expansive statements while studying for his doctorate, my friend said that all postgraduate degree programs are professional training of one sort or another, with a Ph.D. training to be a scholar in a field. And an important part of the training comes from the internship of being a graduate assistant. My friend was saying this as a criticism of the part-time students at his school who were just taking courses and who would, after enough courses, write a dissertation. By their detachment, these students missed the valuable—he would say "crucial"—internship experience. Being a graduate assistant was not just a job.

Of course, many graduate assistantship positions are as low-paid instructors. Yet, with the plethora of faculty essays and commentary pointing out the failures of doctoral programs to prepare future teachers, maybe this training is also like the swimming lesson.

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in that same bygone time when Gerald Ford was the U.S. President, Advertising Department head Watson Dunne had all student instructors, as well as the junior-most tenure-track faculty, assigned to teach at least one section of the introductory course. Everyone used a syllabus he composed, assigned a textbook he selected (and wrote) and he met with the group every few weeks throughout the term to supervise and mentor on basic teaching advice. His syllabus was solid enough that I still use a form of it in my classes, and his advice on handling student assignments was useful for even the new faculty. But that was then, and would be very rare in the modern setting in which the graduate students are given a textbook and little else. Junior faculty in 2010 are expected to arrive on campus, compose syllabi and do a good job, getting shot down at the end of semesters for mistakes or bad jobs or student complaints.

Although many people “use” a doctorate as little more than a teaching certificate to be a university-level instructor with or without the internship-like servitude of graduate teaching, my friend was not thinking of teaching when he referenced the value of being an assistant. (Besides which, those people would not be reading an editorial in an academic journal.) He was focused on the research projects unrelated to class assignments. But at a more basic level, beyond studying the basic issues of the field or confronting the day-to-day details of data collection and analysis, a scholar has to publish the work. Yet at the point of preparing work for publication, the mentoring seems to end.

A part of it is not telling the new scholars that authors must learn to think about the audience for journal articles. The members of the editorial board and ad hoc reviewers are experts in the field, but they are also the types of people we expect to read and cite the articles once published. Many times editors reject manuscripts as editorially inappropriate knowing that they would not have any editorial board members or ad hoc reviewers with the expertise to conduct the double-blind reviews. If no one regularly working for the journal is an expert on the subject or method, it is unlikely that anyone interested in the topic would look for relevant work in that publication.

It is not just subject matter. It is also style or how the research is presented, what questions are raised, or how the results can be interpreted.

Consider the audience ignoring practices at conference presentations as an example of this. It is getting to the point where I feel like leaving the room at the start of every new presentation at ACCI conferences, or meetings on any public policy concerns. Every paper seems driven by recent headlines or government reports, as the authors recite *ad nauseum* a collection of items from the popular press. Anyone making an effort to attend the session already knows all of these things, while the authors still recite it all in redundant mind-numbing detail instead of just getting to the potential contributions, the research questions that drove the research. In submissions to the journal, studies whose existence is ripped from the headlines like a script pitch for a television police procedural program might miss the more important concerns of the research itself (e.g., see Rotfeld and Taylor 2009). For *JCA*, authors of papers in final revision stages before acceptance are getting directions to delete whole paragraphs that are aside the point of more important statements of what the study adds to the research literature.

Still, there exist a number of other problems with many research manuscripts purporting to address the consumers’ interest, beyond bad writing or style.

After reviewers were noting the same problems time and again in manuscripts, members of the editorial board published general statements of these concerns so that they could be shared more broadly (e.g., Carlson 2008; Preston 2009; Richards 2009; Royne 2008). Sometimes researchers submit a manuscript that is itself a controversial critique on approaches to existing data sources (e.g., Lindamood, Hanna, and Bi 2007). I have expressed my own long-time concerns about an overwhelming focus on statistics to the exclusion of thinking (Rotfeld 2007) or times where the research method seems selected to serve the presence of availability samples, usually students (Rotfeld 2003). As an unintended consequence, we have been developing a research guide for consumer scholars (see Appendix 1).

These problems might exist for faculty of all stages of their careers, but as papers are rejected, or in extreme cases sent back to authors as “not ready for being reviewed,” I blame the doctoral teachers who seem to have misplaced the part of the job on guiding their students in writing a research article. Journal articles are not classroom reports, they have many distinctions from dissertations in style and they have a different audience than a grant proposal.

Although I do not know if Professor Rotzoll’s mentoring was common in its time, after several years as editor I can only conclude that it would probably be unusual today. The evidence for this, too, is visible at conferences, not in the presentations, but who is not attending the session.

Many faculty do not attend any sessions by their students even when they are coauthors on the paper. At the more positive extreme was a now-retired faculty member from the University of Texas who was a flurry of activity every year at American Academy of Advertising conferences. John was always on the run to another session, or running between sessions, as he attended every presentation by his doctoral students. And he had a lot of students on every program. Afterward or at mealtimes, he could be seen in debriefing meetings, discussing how to improve the research report, respond to audience questions raised, or prepare eventual publications. But seeing him would merely emphasize for others who care about such things that, as even he would admit, his efforts were rare.

This is not just an observation of one editor, but a common topic of discussion when editors meet. We all receive the papers described above that include a senior faculty coauthor that not only misplaced the job as mentor, but probably did not even read the manuscript prior to submission.

When this editorial was being first drafted, the working title was “\$%&%\$# Mentors” or the more printable but equally offensive “Your

Mentoring Sucks.” Even though they do not know the authors of papers reviewed, members of the editorial board are starting to accompany negative comments for authors with editor-directed detailed complaints of the sorry state of mentoring today, especially when it comes to writing journal articles. With people I have known for many years, I can call them up to express my personal disappointment for letting a paper come to me on which I can clearly see they were less than involved in mentoring the student or junior colleague. For many others, the rejection letters might be quite long to provide feedback that should have come from the doctoral teachers.

This editorial is self-serving, in a way. If the teachers did more mentoring instead of just throwing students into the river of journal publication, we would probably be accepting more papers.

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Appendix: Past JCA Articles & Commentary Guides for Research on the Consumers' Interests

Use, Misuse, and Abuse of Content Analysis for Research on the Consumer Interest

Les Carlson

Journal of Consumer Affairs, 42 (Spring 2008), pp. 100–105

Convenient Abusive Research

Herbert Jack Rotfeld

Journal of Consumer Affairs, 37 (Summer 2003), p. 191

Potential and Pitfalls of Applying Theory to the Practice of Financial Education

Angela C. Lyons, Urvi Neelakantan

Journal of Consumer Affairs, 42 (Spring 2008), pp. 106–112

Theory, Data, Interpretations, and More Theory

Herbert Jack Rotfeld

Journal of Consumer Affairs, 41 (Winter 2007) pp. 376–379

Understanding Communication Research Findings

Ivan L. Preston

Journal of Consumer Affairs, 43 (Spring 2009), pp. 170–173

Disciplined Conduct of Interdisciplinary Research

Herbert Jack Rotfeld

Journal of Consumer Affairs, 43 (Spring 2009), pp. 181–183

Common Fallacies in Law-Related Consumer Research

Jef I. Richards

Journal of Consumer Affairs, 43 (Spring 2009), pp. 174–180

Mistaking Precision for Reality

Herbert Jack Rotfeld

Journal of Consumer Affairs, 41 (Summer 2007), pp. 187–191

Cautions and Concerns in Experimental Research on the Consumer Interest

Marla B. Royne

Journal of Consumer Affairs, 42 (Fall 2008), pp. 478–482

Using the Survey of Consumer Finances: Some Methodological Considerations and Issues

Suzanne Lindamood, Sherman D. Hanna, Lan Bi

with commentary by Jeanne M. Hogarth, Darryl E. Getter, Sandra J. Huston

Journal of Consumer Affairs, 41 (Winter 2007), pp. 195–219

How Do You Know That?

Herbert Jack Rotfeld

Journal of Consumer Affairs, 42 (Spring 2008), pp. 123–126

Trends in *Journal of Consumer Affairs* Feature Articles: 1967–2007

Russell N. James III, Brenda J. Cude

Journal of Consumer Affairs, 43 (Spring 2008), pp. 155–169

Can You Really Say That?

Herbert Jack Rotfeld

Journal of Consumer Affairs, 42 (Fall 2008), pp. 484–487