**Editors map their past to inform their future:  
how well are they reading the signs?**

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**Abstract**

For busy editors, taking time to reflect on their past, present and future may be a luxury, but in these times of discussion about accreditation, it is vital. Contemporary literature about employability in the 21st century emphasises the need for individuals to be lifelong learners, to be able to respond to workplace changes, to be flexible, adaptable and able to market themselves successfully as the consummate employee or service provider. For editors, this has meant re-thinking their roles in the editing and publishing process – is there still a role for them between the ‘inspiration’ stage, and the ‘publication’ stage? If so, what? To answer that, editors must be able to articulate what they currently do, what has informed their knowledge and skills base, and reflect on those issues to shape their professional profiles for the future.

At the 2005 National Editors Conference in Melbourne, a group of editors used a mind-mapping approach to record aspects of their work−life history and through that reflective process, to identify opportunities for change or consolidation. This paper explores those issues in the context of current discussion about accreditation, publishing practices, and changing perceptions about who editors are and what they do.

**Introduction**

By the nature of their work, editors are well placed to observe the ongoing changes in society, in forms of communication, in increased use of computer-based technologies, and the significant impact these changes have on editing and publishing practices. Such rapid changes have implications for the work editors do, and the skills needed to perform and manage those tasks. From a career planning perspective, these changes pose immediate and long-term challenges, not only for those with long career histories, but also for those wishing to enter editing and related professions, as well as for education and training providers, professional associations, and employers.

Historically, editors employed in-house by publishers received training on the job, and in a context which included co-participants in the publishing process e.g. proofreaders, designers, artists, printers and writers. John Thompson (2005), in his major study of the book publishing industries in Britain and the United States, explains that consolidation in the book publishing industry has tended to involve ‘a strategic restructuring of editorial activities’. Editorial activities associated with education publishing are often sold off – seen as less valued than trade publishing activities. Now, with publishing-house takeovers, an increase in ‘self-publishing’, overseas outsourcing, and increased casualisation of editing tasks, editors must more than ever be aware of their professional attributes and capabilities, adaptable to changing work contexts, and proactive in managing and marketing their expertise. How best to do that?

Through cross-referencing professional standards? By consulting career guidelines, or by comparing one’s own profile with those of peers? In the first instance, IPEd accreditation initiatives have both united and divided opinion within Australian societies of editors. In the second, it has become increasingly difficult to locate career descriptors for editors, because the term is usually co-habiting with terms such as ‘web’, or ‘video’ or is subsumed under a much broader term, such as ‘communication’, or ‘media’. In the third instance above – peer comparison – there are fewer opportunities to do this regularly, as more and more editors work as freelancers or on short contracts. Events such as national conferences of editors offer a rare opportunity to merge the three approaches and to attempt to interpret profiles in relation to changes referred to earlier.

**Mind mapping**

In every aspect of our lives we are exposed to visual presentations of information in various forms: road maps, atlases, signage with graphic elements; icons in sheets of instructions, and so on. We develop an understanding of clustered information elements in a succinct, graphic form, often with only single-word text to inform the map or diagram.



Photograph: M Dorman

Cartography (mapping) has long been employed to capture and share information in a graphic form, to expand and inform understanding of the world and its peoples. It is sometimes employed to influence political decisions, and most certainly to establish lines of power and influence. Social cartography, ‘the art and science of mapping ways of seeing’ (Paulston 1996) offers opportunities for further conceptualisation of aspects of our lives and interactions as humans.

With this in mind, Dorman, Nevile and Wright adopted a mind mapping approach to try to capture the diverse knowledge, skills and histories of editors attending the National Editors Conference in Melbourne, 2005. This paper builds on an earlier summary of findings from that event (Dorman, Nevile and Wright 2006), and attempts to contextualise the information gathered in contemporary career planning theory.

**Career planning**

Much contemporary literature highlights Australia’s ‘ageing population’ profile, the need for a flexible, adaptive and responsive workforce, and acceptance of a need for lifelong learning. Typically, career development theories are based on analysis of personal traits, preferences, specific knowledge, skills and attributes, and attempt to match these with job descriptions within particular occupation fields. For example, the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) website offers ‘Do you enjoy or are you good at’ posters to help with career decision-making; these are linked to occupation profiles on the **[myfuture website](http://www.myfuture.edu.au/)**. The DEST posters are updated from time to time, and interestingly, these authors have observed recent changes in the number of references to the term ‘editor’ on the charts, perhaps reflecting the diverse interpretations of the term or confusion as to what editors do, and perpetuating the notion of editors as ‘invisible menders’. Through the mind mapping process, and analysing the profiles of workshop participants, we hope to highlight the diverse roles and skills of editors, and stimulate further debates on professional profiles, knowledge, skills, and associated education and training, particularly in light of accreditation initiatives.

Reflection by individuals on their personal and professional circumstances, attributes and goals is essential to career planning. In the 2003 version of the Australian Standards of Editing Practice, standards were listed under five categories: A) The publishing process, conventions and industry practice; B) Management and liaison; C) Substance and structure; D) Language and illustrations; E) Completeness and consistency. The intention was for editors to benchmark their own knowledge and skills against these standards, and when promoting themselves or their profession. Application of individuals’ knowledge and skills varies according to the context, and individuals also exercise personal judgement as to the type and level of education and/or training in which to engage. For many editors, such professional development is inaccessible because of cost, distance from delivery point, or other commitments. Opportunities to undertake education or training through online, correspondence or other flexible delivery modes are often welcomed by editors or those hoping to become editors. In addition to the challenges of changing workplaces mentioned earlier, plus increased casualisation and low remuneration, employment opportunities vary from state to state, as do pay rates.

Thus, editors face significant challenges in developing appropriate knowledge and skills, and generally managing their career progress. Those with a clear understanding of changing work environments, and the initiative to update their profiles accordingly, are likely to be better able to survive. Flexibility and adaptability are particularly important in relation to those in the later stages of their careers, whether their focus is on maintaining full employment, or opting for different, more flexible work opportunities (Jorgensen 2004).

**Holland Trait Theory**

John Holland’s Self-Directed Search (SDS) is used extensively throughout the world as a career interest inventory. It was designed to facilitate career and education planning by having individuals answer questions about their goals, activities, competencies, occupations and other self-estimates to identify the most suitable occupational focus. The premise behind Holland’s ‘RIASEC’ theory is that ‘best fit’ between environments and personalities results in greater work satisfaction. The Holland Trait Theory (Holland 1985; Lokan & Taylor 1986) identifies six work/personality traits associating an individual’s preferences with occupational roles:

* **Realistic (R)** – engineering, tradesperson, machinery operator, chef, police officer. Mechanical and athletic ability, work outdoors with equipment, tools and machinery. Prefers to work with things rather than people.
* **Investigative (I)** – scientific and medical occupations, biochemist, engineer, economist, computing, land care officer. Mathematical and scientific abilities, and problem-solving. Prefers to work with things rather than people.
* **Artistic (A)** – journalist, interior designer, writer, actor, multimedia developer, graphic designer. Creative and artistic talents. Prefers to work with people rather than things.
* **Social (S)** – teacher, counsellor, nurse, parole officer, welfare worker. People rather than things – equality, self-respect, helpfulness and freedom.
* **Enterprising (E)** – marketing, human resource management, financial investment advisor, lawyer, sports administrator. Leadership, speaking ability, ambition, freedom, success and risk-taking. People rather than things.
* **Conventional (C)** – accountant, auditor, bank worker, database administrator, draftsperson. Clerical and arithmetic ability, keeping records and accuracy, and a preference for organisation and knowing what to expect. People and things.

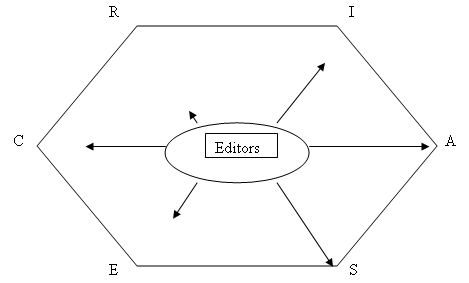


Figure 1: Editors’ trait congruence  
Source: Rhyl Dearden 2007

Where these traits are next to each other, there is said to be congruence, while those most distant are not congruent e.g. A and C are considered incompatible. IRC = Engineering; SEC = Accountancy; SIA = Psychology. SAI = Teaching primary school. SA combinations are common, as are SE, RI, and CE combinations also.

The theory of personal trait and work environment fit states that people of similar traits are drawn to work in similar areas. For example, people with a high need to be interacting and working with others (S – social types) are found in people-oriented work environments such as teaching, public relations and communications. This could at least in part describe many editors.

Arrow length indicates the strength of the Holland Theory Personality Traits that editors’ SDS codes possess (SAC; SCI; CSA, CSI, SIA, SAE, ESI). Editors are a special group whose SDS traits are atypical. They include incompatible traits such as creativity and strong organisational strengths – CA and IE.

**Systems Theory of Career Development**

Patton and McMahon’s Systems Theory Framework of career development (STF) is an instrument that might also help editors to identify the variables that affect their fit with various professional pathways, and thus to respond appropriately via their career planning. The Systems Theory Framework identifies a relationship between individuals and their contexts, particularly in relation to acquisition and application of new knowledge. While knowledge about labour market and career development strategies is vital to people who wish to follow a particular career path, especially one that has an erratic trajectory, some factors may be outside the individual’s control. Still, awareness of those factors (or signs) is critical for decision-making.

**Chaos Theory of Careers**

Stephen Gibb (1998) discusses the concept of career planning in the context of a system which is not stable, and with boundaries that are unclear and forever changing. In this context the term ‘chaos’ does not mean disorder; rather, it is something that is dynamic and complex. One image of the theory is the ‘butterfly effect’ – a natural, complex system so sensitive to initial conditions that the beating of a butterfly’s wings could influence the weather system on the other side of the world (Gibb 1998, p. 149). In a career sense, this might relate to an initial career decision which has later ramifications during one’s career e.g. choosing to research a particular topic which might lead to employment opportunities requiring that expertise. Janet Mackenzie (2005), looking through the lens of selected extracts from Victorian Society of Editors newsletters offers greater insights into editors’ career pathways, lived experiences, and personal attributes of those who walked, fell or were pushed into editing and lived to tell the tale: ‘Being a good editor is a mindset, a personality, an imponderable’ (p. 163, Wendy Sutherland).

**Holland’s theory applied to information about editors**

Holland’s Trait Theory was chosen for this analysis because of its focus on individual traits, thus facilitating individuals’ reflections on aspects which are unique to them, but also offering key reference points for peer comparisons within a professional context. While pathways might differ in some aspects, we suggest that key personal descriptors for editors may remain consistent. Further research on editors’ attributes (and values) will continue to inform interpretations.

Being open to possibilities is arguably one of the necessary personality factors that will assist the editor of the future. Brooks, Pinson and Sissors forecast in 1997 that editors would have more competition than in the past, as consumers ‘look to other sources of information (such as the Web, blogs, chat rooms and other open access publishing avenues) to help guide them in their decision making’ (p. 9). They stated that good editors could help consumers to sort through vast amounts of information, and help to determine credibility, maintaining their value through adapting their roles.

Editors are multi-faceted people who typically need to draw upon a wide range of skills and extended knowledge, as well as advanced knowledge and skills for specialisations such as scientific editing, fiction editing, or in relation to publishing method e.g. online or print, book or newspaper publishing, and so on. They are often described in conflicting terms: powerful (‘gatekeepers’) but invisible (often not identified in publications); accommodating but decisive; discrete but assertive; generalists AND specialists.

[**JobGuide 2007**](http://www.jobguide.thegoodguides.com.au/) cautions would-be editors that there are few openings in publishing houses each year and competition is keen. For those in the profession, advancement requires capacity for hard work plus finely honed business and marketing skills. This suggests that it would be easy to lose ‘visibility’ in the profession for those who, for various reasons, opt out temporarily, become freelancers, change specialisations or experience involuntary redundancy through industry rationalisation.

Keeping pace with changes in editing contexts and editors’ roles poses particular challenges for providers of education and training programs. For example, the University of Southern Queensland postgraduate programs are regularly reviewed and updated to ensure they remain relevant and offer authentic learning contexts for editor-students whether in early, mid or late career. Students develop/refine skills in:

* on-screen as well a hard copy editing
* version control, including electronic folder and file management
* substantive and structural editing in multiple formats
* publishing ethics and working in a team environment, including practising role-plays
* rehearsal for communicating with offshore typesetters and proofreaders
* legal requirements and permission-seeking protocols appropriate for ‘new’ forms of publication
* using contemporary online communication environments to practise clear and professional communication in a peer-supported learning environment.

For many students, such contexts for group learning may be replacing the traditional publishing house environment, where the apprenticeship model prevailed. As more editing tasks are outsourced, there may be more stable communities of practice formed in higher education courses, or through membership of professional bodies, such as the societies of editors.

To form a picture of editors and what they do, Dorman, Nevile and Wright (2005) collected lists of key ‘working words’ used by editors to describe their roles, and these were analysed according to Holland’s categories, then mapped as personal traits (see figure 2). These were then cross-referenced against descriptors used by editors in creating their personal maps (see figure 3). They were also considered in relation to examples of career descriptors published by reputable authorities e.g. Australian Government careers guides, *Job Guide 2007*. The latter lists the following personal requirements for editors:

* highly literate, with a sound knowledge of English grammar
* eye for detail
* able to concentrate on written work for long periods
* good general knowledge
* good organisational skills
* able to produce detailed and accurate work, often to tight deadlines
* good management and leadership skills
* aptitude for using computers.

Source: [**Job Guide 2007, Editor ASCO: 253411**](http://www.jobguide.thegoodguides.com.au/occupation/Editor)

University studies in communications, journalism, professional writing, English or media studies are required, in addition to evidence of a wide range of reading and general interests. Editors might also need to undertake further specialist studies, for, say, editing science publications.

Applying Holland Trait Theory to the self-descriptors used by the group of editors in the 2005 mind mapping workshop, their dominant traits were revealed as social (S), conventional (C), artistic (A) and investigative (I). The (S) trait is strongly people-related (e.g. interacting with authors, artists, publishers, printers etc), while the (C) trait applies to things (e.g. checking proofs, editing books, websites, checking artwork and final publications). Examples of artistic (A) descriptors and activities appear in figures 2 (Editors’ activities) and 3 (Holland Traits) with the investigative (I) dimension demonstrated through analysis, problem-solving, judgement-based activities, and scientific knowledge (see figure 3). Significantly, creativity (A) is seen as a valuable attribute for future employability. The 2004 Hudson report, ‘The ageing population: implications for the Australian workforce’ notes a shift to ‘an ideas and creativity driven environment’, and highlights the value of employees who can interpret and respond rapidly to changes, something editors have demonstrated they are well able to do (Jorgensen 2004, p. 7).

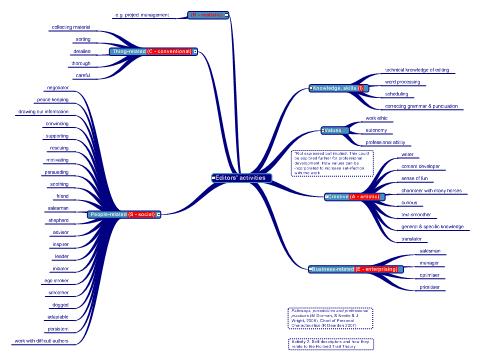


Figure 2: Editors’ activities

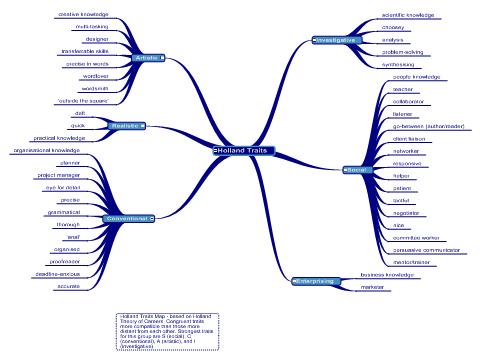


Figure 3: Holland Traits

The range of activities and attributes demonstrated by these editors is consistent with information gathered by Brown and Dorman (2007), in which editors were asked to outline their roles, qualifications and work experience. Their responses were indicative of a ‘lifelong learning’ approach to professional development in a group whose qualifications already ranged from Bachelor’s degrees through to Masters and Doctoral qualifications, in addition to various other professional development courses and specialist training (e.g. computer courses). Similarly, the maps created by the 2005 workshop groups indicated a mix of higher education qualifications as well as other specialist training. There was also evidence of diverse backgrounds, where some editors had begun their careers as scientists, librarians or teachers, for instance.

The strong social (S) marker in the Holland Trait analysis for the 2005 group is supported by findings in the 2007 paper. When asked what they thought should be ‘saved, changed or discarded’ those in the later survey group highlighted interpersonal interaction as a key aspect to be preserved. They also identified the setting and monitoring of editorial schedules, supervisory and management tasks (C, I) as well as depth and complexity of the editing experience (A). Their emphasis on personal and professional integrity, and on quality outcomes is also reflected in the Values category represented in figure 2 (Editors’ activities).

Thus, while there are individual differences between responses for the 2005 cohort and those in the Brown & Dorman (2007) paper, and different data collection methods, there are strong similarities in the responses of the two groups in relation to core activities for editors in contemporary work contexts.

**Leaving Gill Sans in the Underground**

The question remains as to how well equipped editors are to identify and respond to changes in work opportunities and environments. The analysis of traits suggests that editors in the 2005 sample offer a unique combination of skills and attributes which are likely to be transferable and relevant to a range of contexts: after all, many have already entered the profession via diverse pathways. There is acceptance that many aspects of their working lives are changing, but for many, such changes offer other opportunities to expand their roles and skills. Mackenzie (2005) notes that the Society of Editors (Victoria) ‘has encouraged its members, both in-house and freelance, to expand the editor’s role [and] has educated them in new technology, production, typesetting, indexing, illustration and design…’ (Preface p. viii). Similarly, the various societies of editors throughout Australia conduct regular meetings, professional development activities, and maintain up-to-date web sites, linked to the national professional body, IPEd. Regular national conferences also offer opportunities to engage members in discussion about issues associated with roles, identities and professional futures. The trait profiles elicited from the mapping activities and key-term analysis suggests that contemporary editors are indeed reading the signs and are well positioned to change pathways as needed.

It remains to be asked, whether or not the title ‘editor’ can do justice to the emerging roles and the significant experience and expertise of those who currently practise under this banner. These days, a simple Google search for editing vacancies is likely to result in a plethora of jobs, ranging from ‘Junior Mechanical Draftsman’ to ‘Systems Specialist’, ‘Senior Portal Producer’, ‘Web Designer’ and a few ‘traditional’ editorial roles sprinkled in between. Should editors be fighting to reclaim the title, or nominating a new term which better represents the valuable roles they play? In an extract from the 1997 newsletters from the Society of Editors (Victoria), the extract titled, ‘The Multi-Skilled Editor’ (Paul Judd, May 1997) offers the following insight: ‘Gill Sans, for example, was invented for the London Underground and is a great display face, but a poor text face.’ (Mackenzie 2005, p. 319). Perhaps it is also time for editors to invent and promote a new ‘display face’?

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