Related affairs

SFEP: from isolation to professionalization

Hazel K. Bell

The Society of Freelance Editors and Proofreaders (SFEP) was founded less than ten years ago by one woman, Norma Whitcombe, a computer programmer turned freelance. Meeting fellow freelance editors at an open day at Blackwells in 1987 emphasized the freelance's want of contact with colleagues, and made her feel how useful a society of editors – similar to the Society of Indexers (SI) to which she already belonged – would be. All those she discussed the idea with were enthusiastic and urged her to proceed and start such a society.

A Society of Indexers' conference in July 1988 offered more encouragement, and Norma was further convinced of the need for a society of editors and proofreaders on learning of the very low rates of pay earned by a newcomer who asked her advice.[1] She announced the prospect at that conference, and came away with eleven names and addresses of interested helpers. These contacted their own clients, who put the embryonic society in touch with their freelances. Norma was also a member of Oxford Women in Publishing and of Homebase (a network for people working at home), so had several more appropriate contacts.

A meeting was convened at ASLIB's premises in London, on 26 November 1988. The room was crowded, with more than sixty attending. After animated discussion of the need for training and professional accreditation (there was then no certification in editing or proofreading), the desirability of raising standards

Norma Whitcombe

generally, payment rates and lateness, contracts, tax allowances, expenses assessment, legal definitions of freelancing and possible eligibility for membership,[2] the Society of Freelance Copy-Editors and Proofreaders (its provisional first title, after much agonising as to whether 'copy-' and 'freelance' should be included) was inaugurated, 'to counteract a sense of isolation among freelances and to encourage contact between freelances and publishers'.[3] Norma Whitcombe was elected Chair; Judith Butcher, author of *Copy-editing: the Cambridge handbook*, was (and remains) President.

The new Society's first newsletter followed in December 1988, its aims set out as: (a) to maintain high standards of editorial work; (b) to meet other members for discussion and mutual support; (c) to produce a newsletter and membership list; (d) to investigate the possibilities of training members new to editorial work and provide refresher courses for more experienced members. The Society's first Annual General Meeting, in November 1989, adopted a 23-clause constitution. Freelancing burgeoned through the following years, owing to factors both technical (teleworking, email) and economic (streamlining and redundancies at publishing houses). An SFEP member spoke at a Book House Training Centre Seminar in 1995 of how her profession had changed in the past decade: she had been able to set up as a copy-editor originally possessed of no more than a red and a blue biro. Now she had to invest thousands in furnishing her

office.[4] SFEP developed in parallel. It grew rapidly, attaining 640 members by 1990. Corporate membership was instituted, to allow these 'to meet freelances informally at meetings and conferences, and to share ideas and experiences with other corporate members'.[5] It held meetings (in particular to consider the new National Vocational Qualifications), established a monthly newsletter, regional groups and Special Interest Groups. It made its presence felt in the publishing world, with a stand at the London Book Fair, co-operation with Book House Training Centre in a survey of the training needs of editorial freelances, and representation at other societies' meetings: those of EASE (European Association of Science Editors), the Independent Publishers' Guild, the Society of Indexers, Women in Publishing. SFEP joined ALPSP in 1991. Its members have served on the Editorial Board of *Learned Publishing*: Michael Robertson as software reviews editor, 1995-6, and Sue Deeley currently as book reviews editor.

Like many other voluntary organizations, SFEP had no headquarters – its officers all worked from their homes. In 1991, two members of the Society of Indexers (founded 1958) who were leaving London but retaining their NW1 house, let one of its rooms jointly to the two sister societies – SFEP and SI – who also com-

SFEP Conference 1990: Lesley Ward, Conference Registrations; Judith Wardman, Training Co-ordinator; Michèle Clarke, Chair; and Dorothy Michell Smith, Training Officer for North.

bined to pay a part-time administrative officer. In 1996, they together moved their joint office, complete with part-time

employee, to occupy an office suite at Mermaid House in south-east London.

Norma Whitcombe spoke at an ALPSP seminar, 'Editorial training and recruitment', in 1991, on 'Opting out and jobbing out'.[5] She said of the economics of publishers' staff employment: 'An employee costs his/her employee around two and a half times their salary, because of overheads, National Insurance Contributions, pension, holiday pay, sick pay... it is generally accepted that freelances are more productive per hour'; of freelance finances; and told ALPSP members how to find and keep good freelances.

In 1991, SFEP's third year, Norma was found to have a brain tumour,

SFEP Stand, London Book Fair 1990

and she died aged 49 in 1992. In her memory, SFEP set up the Whitcombe Training Fund, with the goal of providing training for freelances, running foundation courses and training and assessing tutors and mentors. An annual series of 'Whitcombe lectures' was also to be given.

SFEP conferences have been held annually since 1990. Its membership passed the thousand in its sixth year, and now stands at around 1600.

SFEP's first directory, *Members available for work*, was published in 1990 and distributed free to publishers. It consisted of 96 pages, listing 296 individual and seven corporate entries, each with a concise picture of subjects tackled and at what level of complexity; qualifications; experience; and facilities available to the freelance mentioned – with indexes to subjects and skills. The direc-

tory was revised and reissued each year. The 1997 edition, *Members' services* (196 pages), received an enthusiastic review in *Learned Publishing*.[6]

SFEP's training courses – workshops and tutorial days – are run three or four times a month. They are demand-led and self-funding; the most popular are *Introduction to proofreading*, *Introduction to copyediting*, and *Brush up your grammar*. They are held round the country, but chiefly in London.

An Accreditation scheme is being established, for proofreading, copy-editing, or the two together. Tests will be sent to applicants to be completed at home; use of reference books will be allowed, but not consultation of any person. Registration, a complementary qualification, is now being awarded by the Accreditation Board. Applicants who have carried out at least 2,000 hours of proofreading or copy-editing within the previous five years nominate three publishers or other clients to complete approval forms. Possession of NVQs accreditation in book editing, proofreading or copy-editing also gains Registration in the relevant category.

In 1995 SFEP established a Code of Practice, intended 'to establish and maintain standards of work for SFEP members and to act as a reference for clients'. In 44 pages, sent to all members, details are given of its objectives, definitions, standards of professional work; standards of conduct; and expectations of the client, with specimen editorial agreement and feedback forms.

The print form of all SFEP publications is handsome and elegant (with credits to their proofreaders printed). The newsletter (ten issues per year) has been restyled as *CopyRight*.

SFEP has become both international and electronic, with 34 members overseas in 15 countries, including Australia, Japan and Uganda. Michael Robertson, based in Augsburg, wrote in LOGOS in 1996, 'Today, 95% of my work is onscreen. ... From my base in Germany, I can put an edited document of several hundred pages on a colleague's desktop in Japan in five seconds. ... a precipitous metamorphosis.'[7]

SFEP has its own Web site (www.sfep.demon.co.uk). Its directory is accessible there in electronic form. There are three online mailing lists: EDline for discussion of general editorial matters; LANGLine, for linguists and translators; Grapevine, for computer-related issues.

SFEP has developed as Norma Whitcombe originally hoped (her one still unfulfilled aspiration was that it should produce its own academic journal[1]). Less than ten years old, it is established as a thoroughly modern, professional organization of professional practitioners.

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