Editorial: Treating peer review comments on submissions for publication in educational journals as feedforward

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Focus

We offer a short introduction to those aspects of the publishing process which explain how and why peer review occurs. We then outline suggestions from an author's point of view about how to work with, and benefit from, reviewers' comments, with due consideration of the editor's viewpoint and role. In essence, this editorial sets out to help prospective authors of educational papers to appreciate where the reviewers and editor are coming from, and how their comments and suggestions originate and should be handled. We close by looking specifically at how to cope in a practical way by treating the comments as feedforward. This piece is written particularly for those scholars who are new to, or unfamiliar with, submitting drafts for consideration in the peer review process.

Background literature review about publication-based peer review

Introduction

Scholars have always sought to share and validate their research beyond their immediate groupings. In 1665, learned societies established the first scientific journals. Journals have now become core to the research enterprise, effectively communicating research results globally. Through this method of dissemination, scholars can interrogate the work of others, develop and extend that work, and potentially develop new questions and theories (Research Information Network 2015). A thorough overview of changes in academic publishing over the centuries is helpfully provided by Fyfe and colleagues (2017); these authors emphasise that, within the last 25 years, the considerable growth in the number of academics has led to a substantial increase in publications. In 2015 it was estimated there were 28,000 scholarly journals, publishing approximately two million articles annually (Research Information Network 2015). This rise in publications in high-quality journals may also be attributed to the link between research output, academic prestige and career progression, as noted by Fyfe et al. (2017).

What is publication-based peer review?

Scholars have long attached much importance to the peer review process and continue to do so, considering it to play a central role in the publishing and communication of their work (Ware 2016). Prior to having a piece accepted, or not, for publication, by a selected journal, a scholar should expect their work to be peer reviewed. Peer review, previously known as 'refereeing' is "the process of subjecting an author's scholarly manuscript to the

scrutiny of others who are experts in the same field" (Ware 2013, p4). The purpose of peer review is to:

- ensure that work is of an appropriate standard
- scrutinise the publication for fraud or misconduct
- check for originality and significance
- consider if the work is genuinely of interest to the community
- advise if the work is suitable for the particular publication.

As Ware (2013) acknowledges in his informed publication, the peer review process is certainly accorded considerable weight by academics as a vehicle for improving the quality of published work. Firstly, as Ware notes, the process encourages authors to raise the quality of their work prior to submission, ensuring the submitted work is aligned with the particular journal's guidelines. Secondly, Ware emphasises that the feedback scholars receive from the peer review process encourages them to revisit their work, scrutinise and refine. Thus, as Mulligan and Raphael stress, many scholars consider peer review to be "the lynchpin around which the whole research information exchange is based" (2010, p.25). This is supported in Ware's findings from three studies of peer review undertaken in 2007, 2009 and 2015, demonstrating that researcher satisfaction with peer review has remained very positive (Ware, 2016).

How does the review process work?

On receiving a submission, an editor of a journal will usually read the work and decide if the piece will progress to peer review. If so, the editor next selects two, or potentially more, peer reviewers who will be asked to advise if the paper is acceptable, acceptable with minor changes, or needs to revisited and then resubmitted, – or rejected. Depending on the journal, the reviewer may be asked to make particular comments on specified areas. The reviewers may also decide to send a brief note to the editor explaining their decision. The editor will receive the reviews, which often are contradictory (Hartley, 2012). It is then the editor's decision that determines the subsequent progress, or not, of the paper. A fuller, more detailed exploration of this process has been provided by Ware (2013). When an editor decides to progress with a particular submission, it is customary for them to forward reviewers' comments unaltered but possibly supplemented by some remarks from the editor. The authors are then invited to respond.

Are there concerns about the peer review process?

"It is commonly pointed out that peer review, like all systems based on human endeavour, sometimes fails to fulfil one or more of its intended purposes, and suffers from a number of imperfections" (Research Information Network, 2015, p.10).

There is a strong belief amongst academics that the quality of work shared with the community is particularly dependent upon the quality of the peer reviewers; however, the recruitment of high quality reviewers is often problematic. As Callaham and Tercier (2007) stress in their extensive investigation into the work of reviewers, there is no specific predictor of who may, or may not, be a quality peer reviewer. Usually the editor will select partly from their own contacts but also from a database maintained by publishers – although the editor of one reputable educational journal selects reviewers in strict rotation. Editors generally have procedures to ensure that reviewers are neither under nor over critical, but find that "Achieving an appropriate balance between properly-rigorous review on the one hand and unduly critical review on the other is not easy" (Research Information Network, p2). Typically, editors will (at least informally) employ one of a variety of quality assurance mechanisms to monitor and review the performance of their reviewers. This selection and monitoring process is discussed in more detail in Ware (2013).

However, further concerns persist. These extend, for instance, to the double-blind review process which is now prevalent. In this instance, the author and reviewer are unknown to each other; however, many assert that this system is inherently flawed, with reviewers 'guessing' authors and thus leading to possible bias on grounds of sex, race, nationality or field of study (Research Information Network, 2015). The double-blind review process also precludes access by the reviewer to publications by the concealed author, although the detail of these may be relevant to an informed review of this later publication. In addition, high prestige journals tend to be conservative, and reject unusual or contradictory research (De Grazia, The Velikovsky Affair, 1966). Other issues noted by the Research Information Network (2015) also include failure to act rigorously as a quality assurance mechanism, and failure to ensure that the most original papers are published in the best journals.

The peer review process can certainly be time-consuming, demanding extra work and the enhancement or refinement of scholars' work. However, nine out of ten scholars, in an international study conducted by Mulligan and colleagues in 2009, believed that peer review had definitely improved the last paper they had published. Later work reported by the Research Information Network confirms this earlier finding, reporting that "authors have expressed gratitude for the assistance they have been given enhancing the quality and impact of their work" (2015, p8). We maintain here that the consequent revision and additional work for authors enhances the quality of their draft submission, and especially so if comments are approached as constructive feedforward.

We now discuss how authors can address comments received from reviewers to improve the quality of their work.

Coping with initial reactions to the editor's decision with review comments

Many reviewers offer their comments in the form of their identification of what they judge needs to be amended or added to render the submitted article acceptable. Some reviewers concentrate uncompromisingly on what they see as flaws, and may explain in terse and somewhat stark terms why they so classify them. Only a very few reviewers write hurtfully, in caustic terms. Nevertheless, in our experience the initial reaction of authors to a barrage of what they will read as predominantly negative comments can verge on despair, and may lead to a firm inclination to withdraw the submission.

We encourage authors to react positively to what they may initially have regarded simply as dismissive judgements. We advise that they should take it for granted that an editor's invitation to revise and resubmit, however qualified, has clearly not intimated rejection of the draft. They should assume that the editor is minded to progress towards publication, if possible. It is with that interpretation that the authors should approach the comments, judgements and suggestions they have received – as positive steps towards publication. They should also be aware that an editor may not agree or fully support the comments of a particular reviewer, which may still have been forwarded to authors in full, as promised by the journal's published procedures. There will thus be scope within authors' responses for a few reviewers' suggestions to be disregarded, or questioned with the editor; and some may lead to a strengthening of a view expressed in the text, with which a reviewer has reasonably disagreed.

Authors' initial reactions may dwell overmuch on what they see as negative judgements expressed by the reviewers. It is sound practice, and morale-boosting, for them to take time before addressing the task of making revisions to remind themselves of the aspects of the submission which have been singled out for commendation by the reviewers, or have even earned muted praise by escaping comments!

Making changes for enhancement

As authors ourselves, we have found it effective to engage with each review comment individually, and to summarise briefly in a table the response that we have decided to make. We are not always clear if these responses find their way back to reviewers for reconsideration, or if they are considered solely by the editor, or even if the revised draft is simply then judged freshly and directly on its merits. Journals vary in how reviewers' comments are handled. However, whatever the readership to which our responses will be conveyed, we find the discipline of summarising them immensely helpful. It enhances both our thinking and our revision of the text, leading to changes which we perceive as improvements.

- Some changes may be necessary because we have disregarded house style or submitted ungrammatical text. In such cases, a brief and sincere apology and intimation that the recommended or required change has been made should deal adequately with the reviewer's comment.
- Some changes may be occasioned by cumbersome text which has proved confusing or unconvincing for the reviewer. This is useful feedback, no matter how it is expressed. There is clearly need for revision, and we should frame it as if in response to a genuinely troubled reader who has helpfully told the editor (and the authors) of their difficulties.
- Some changes may be responses to suggestions for significant restructuring, by the cutting and pasting and amending of sections of text. These revisions will usually improve the effectiveness of the message being conveyed, although they may require at least slight modifications in what is transposed, so that it fits in its new setting.
- Some changes may arise from our acceptance of firm advice or requirements for deletions of elements of material over which we as authors laboured long and conscientiously. Since we are writing for future readers, and not for ourselves, we should generally accept – with whatever regrets – the need for removal of our treasured but unacceptable prose.
- Some changes may entail modifications to our writing style with which we then feel uncomfortable, but which it seems the editor would clearly prefer. If the message conveyed in this format is still essentially *our* message, we should be prepared to adjust.
- Some changes respond to helpful suggestions from a thoughtful and knowledgeable reviewer, which significantly enhance our message or the way it is conveyed. We will have made these revisions with enthusiasm, and should try to convey that in our tabled thanks to the reviewer.

Responding to comments which raise difficulties

These difficulties may take different forms, and should be treated in different ways which we here suggest on the basis of our personal practice:

- Occasionally authors will be confronted with suggestions in which a reviewer implicitly advocates stark disagreement with the journal's published requirements for authors. It should suffice to point this out to the editor, and quietly disregard the request.
- As noted above, it is not uncommon for two reviewers to offer starkly contrary advice. The authors should merely point this out, and then feel free to choose which line to follow, explaining their choice to the editor in their table of responses.
- Occasionally a reviewer may call for a change which is demonstrably incorrect or unsound. The authors should simply point out the error to the editor in their response table, indicating a source for verification of their rejection of the recommendation; they should then take no further action.
- A fundamental disagreement may arise in which dissension with a view, course of action or conclusion contained in the submission, are expressed by a reviewer who gives

reasons for that standpoint. In many such cases, authors may find it both sufficient and constructive to acknowledge the contrary view, to present it briefly and fairly, to explain why they cannot subscribe to it, and then to sustain their own preference accordingly. However, if their position is important to the substance of the submission, they may feel the need to take and further justify their firm stance.

Editorial and reviewers' preferences

Most editorial preferences are declared in the published guidelines. Whether or not American or English language is preferred should be ascertained from the editor, before preparation of the draft, if it is not declared in the guidelines.

Conventions with regard to gender can create significant problems for both editor and authors. If the editor rigorously precludes the use of "he" or "she", the authors may regard "they' and "them' as ungrammatical and sometimes ambiguous in regard to number. In these circumstances, the authors would well be advised to take account of this in their initial drafting, and frame sentences which should be acceptable to both editor and authors.

We increasingly encounter review comments which mention unfavourably the use of references to publications dated earlier than the current century. This may well arise from disregard by the authors of more recent publications of relevance; if so, the omission should receive their careful attention. However, difficulties may arise for the authors if, as in one particular example we have in mind as authors, nothing adding significantly to the accepted state of knowledge has been published in the past 30 years. In this case, the authors had no recourse but to briefly reassure readers (and editor) of the diligence of their search of the literature in the consequent 30 years, by outlining their search.

It is not unknown for a reviewer to take exception to the age of long-standing but seminal literature which has been cited as authority. If this problem arises, we suggest accommodating the reviewer by citing a recent state-of-the-art review which appreciatively acknowledges, summarises and builds upon the early publications.

Basic and almost unforgiveable flaws in submissions

Submissions may contain flaws which are almost unforgiveable, and in the face of which reviewers and editors are nevertheless expected to formulate unbiased judgements. It is regrettably not uncommon for submissions in a Word document to contain numerous examples of errors in spelling and grammar that would have been detected, and could have been corrected, through simple use of the provided spellcheck. This disregard of the checking facility immediately conveys an unfortunately strong negative message.

Citations and reference lists naturally interest reviewers, on behalf of prospective readers. Such reading is hampered when a citation is not contained in the reference list, or when the reference list contains a publication of which no mention has been made in the text, or when citation details and listed reference are not in agreement. Again, there is really no excuse for such carelessness. We presume and hope in what we have written here that we address authors who will zealously attempt to avoid such flaws.

Conclusion: Review as feedback – and feedforward

We have suggested in this editorial that feedback from reviewers which is passed on to authors of prospective publications for their consideration should not be formulated or regarded as critical judgements. Rather should they be given attention as diligent scholarly feedback. We commend the efforts of many reviewers to go beyond summative feedback to provide formative feedforward and suggest scope for enhancement, even if it is not expressly worded in these terms. We encourage author colleagues to treat and respond to

reviewers' comments as feedforward of a high standard, detailed to considerable depth. And we testify to the rewards which can then ensue in the form of almost unqualified acceptance of revised manuscripts for publication. If this proves so, we hope authors are ready to identify and report with gratitude the contribution by reviewers and reviewing to the final output.

[Comment from Nick Rushby, Editor-in-Chief *Education & Self Development*: In publishing this editorial we have continued the new tradition of using this space in the Journal to inform authors who are intending to contribute to this Journal (and other journals) of various aspects of scholarly publishing. I commend and fully support the advice given by John Cowan and Susi Peacock. John is one of the most experienced reviewers that I know. I have worked in scholarly publishing with him for over 25 years and value his wisdom.]

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