

Reflections on the review: Expertise and the emerging scholar

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The intellectual landscape

Changes to higher education in the past twenty years have been fuelled by the conviction that high performance in research is crucial to securing national advantage in the global arena. Within a rhetoric of excellence, Calhoun (2006: 9) suggests this has come to be inextricably linked to “the pursuit of recognition and especially the positional good of being seen to be better than others”. Quality assurance is no longer about maintaining quality and standards across institutions, but rather seeks to demonstrate difference that reflects the competitive edge of some over others (Brennan & Singh, 2011). Academic staff members are expected to be increasingly visible as international, cross- institutional, inter- and intra-faculty researchers and networkers, entrepreneurial in gaining selective research funding, and obliged to aid their institution in securing a favourable ranking with the best of the world class universities (Deem, 2010).

New models of research evaluation such as New Zealand’s Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) have been central to circumscribing criteria for mobilising research effort in the pursuit of institutional reputation and high-profile research status. As noted by Tessler and Anderson (2012: 18), “PBRF results are aggressively used by the winners in their formal and informal promotional material”. There is also a personal incentive to engage. Where the amount of income received by institutions depends on the graded status of their individual members as in the outcomes-based PBRF model, demonstrated performance on this model can be seen as providing a competitive advantage for employment and promotion opportunities (Ashcroft, 2005). This legitimates the increasing pressure on academics to devote time and effort not only to the research enterprise itself, but also to enhancing evidence portfolios which will present their publications, expressions of peer esteem, and other research-related activities to best advantage. Failure to meet PBRF obligations can be a risky business (Bridgeman, 2007).

There are much graver consequences for developing researchers, with new or almost completed doctorates, who are hoping to embark on academic careers. As universities focus on consolidating their research excellence, academics with the highest ranking research portfolios become crucial to the endeavour, leaving slim pickings for those whose research endeavours are still to be put to the test. With little by way of systematic preparation for academic roles and even less understanding of how such experiences might relate to a future in the academy (Austin, 2003) early career researchers are often left to juggle heavy teaching loads with the imperative to “publish or perish”. In this they face a double-edged sword, in need of mentoring to build a research portfolio if they are to enter the competition, but short of support from colleagues who are obliged to attend to their own standing in the PBRF ranking. In what is often a solitary endeavour, submitting an article for publication can be a daunting experience, especially when the comments from the peer reviewers will provide the first expert response to the work. This renders imperative Benos, Kirk and

Hall's (2003) concern that reviewers need to be mindful of the author and of their duty to be respectful and fair in their comments.

In what follows, I examine literature relating to the politics of the peer review process to argue that it is often less than encouraging for the novice researcher. I then demonstrate my argument by analysing a peer review report that I received as an early career academic at a time when the PBRF process was beginning to shape the research environment in New Zealand. The experience effectively halted my attempts to seek publication for almost a year. With the stakes even higher for those young academics who have not gained permanent employment, I argue for a process that is critical but constructive rather than hostile and destructive.

Experts and ethics

There are sound reasons for supporting the peer review process. It has the potential to assure both the contributing academic and the readers of a published work of its scholarly rigour. A thoughtful reviewer response can also offer guidance for an author who is asked to undertake revisions prior to publication (Harrison, 2004). However, Souder (2011: 55) suggests that an increase in scholarship about the peer review process indicates that its "moral shortcomings" have rendered it "a matter of practical concern". This is in part because of identified flaws in the process, but also because of the fact that, under the new system of public management of universities, it has assumed a wide and influential role in the selection of scholarly work for publication, in evaluating and prioritising research, and in deciding how research grants are distributed and careers are shaped (Hansson, 2010; Souder, 2011). The ethical dimensions of the peer review process have therefore become the subject of on-going debate.

Peer review is subjective, political and contentious (Mutch, 2009). It is also a closed process that relies on trust and reputation rather than external audit (Harrison, 2004). There is, therefore, considerable obligation on journal editors to ensure that the reviews are fair, thoughtful and sound, and that readers' access to a range of perspective or scholarly opinion is not restricted. As Harrison (2004: 361) notes, "we live in an open pluralist society in which science, politics and public policy are advanced through a willingness to engage in debate with a range of viewpoints, including ones held to be controversial". However, while peer review prior to publication is intended to be a collegial process, as Souder (2011) explains, there will always be a human element at play which creates potential for personal beliefs, attitudes, and values to undermine objective evaluation or even sound judgement. If an article brings a new reading to an event or issue that confronts a hitherto unchallenged received view, and is assigned reviewers who are entrenched in a closed mindset, this may evoke a negative response which may well serve as a controlling, rather than a motivating factor for one of the up-coming generation of critically engaged young scholars.

Selection of reviewers is in itself a subjective aspect of the peer review process. For Benos et al. (2003: 47), an invitation to act as a reviewer is "an honour" which acknowledges one's status in a specific area of research and which provides an opportunity to make a service contribution to the academic community. It is commonly taken for granted that those selected to be reviewers are experts in their field. But what exactly does this mean? Does it mean they have expertise in the specific issue being introduced in the article, or perhaps that they are experts in the particular theoretical framework or methodological approach that are foundational to the work? How comprehensive does their expertise have to be, vis-à-vis the various intellectual strands that make up the article for review? What makes them adequate to the task?

Berkenkotter (1995) considers that the role of disciplinary experts is to judge, authenticate and maintain quality control or acceptance of new knowledge. This, she suggests, is an integral part of peer review. The potential for bias to influence judgements has prompted a number of writers to question the issue of anonymity in the review process and whether freedom from disclosure enables freedom from restraint in reviewer response (Mutch, 2009). As Atkinson (2001: 197) sees it,

anonymity “absolves reviewers from accountability and frees them from the need to suppress whims and self-interests”. It is not uncommon for professionals “to write hostile reviews that at times have more of the characteristic of a personal attack than of a constructive critique of the work they are reviewing” (Sternberg, 2003: 159). Even the harshest critique can be communicated with sensitivity, Stenberg claims, and it is inappropriate that reviewer anonymity can leave the author open to personalised attack. As Benos et al. (2003) suggest, reviewer support to authors should provide a balanced critique, one that identifies the positive, offers helpful suggestions for addressing specific criticisms, and is free from personalised or offensive comment. For these authors, there is no way that open displays of prejudice or hostility can be justified.

As a practice that is often seen as integral to, or an extension of, the scientific process, peer review has been critiqued as being “remarkably unscientific” (Atkinson, 2001: 196). Of concern for Atkinson is that research in the area has not been successful in addressing problems that have been identified. Most significantly, he argues, “[t]here are relatively few available case histories of error or injustice demonstrating the intrinsic fallibility of review opinion, while a modern emphasis on retrospective statistics of rejections is glossing over real problems” (Anderson, 2001: 199). While social networking sites appear to have provided some relief valve for the disillusioned and distressed recipients of poor reviews in recent years, at the more formal level of scholarly publication, Anderson’s concern remains relevant today and provides justification for this paper. Perhaps something can be gained by bringing an almost ten-year-old skeleton out from the closet. It has remained in there for some reason.

The study

The paper that I had submitted for review was a background study to an oral history research project I was conducting with the support of my institution’s new staff development fund. The project focused on student experiences in a two-year programme of concurrent university study and post-primary teacher education that was introduced in New Zealand in 1962 to help address a staffing crisis. The programme was designed specifically for bonded recipients of teaching studentships who had not obtained the required number of university passes to retain their financial assistance. In training undergraduate teachers, it cut across long-standing debates about whether university qualifications or professional and practical factors should be given priority in preparing teachers for the secondary service. Consequently it was met with a variety of responses from the education sector.

The students had in common unsuccessful initial university studies but many went on to higher degrees and successful careers. Because many students entering teacher education programmes today come with similar first experiences of tertiary study I was interested in investigating if there were features of the programme that provided trainees with a supportive and reaffirming educational experience that contributed to their later success. My initial interest was to uncover professional attitudes towards the students through an analysis of the ways in which they were represented in institutional discourses. From an analysis of archival material, I was able to conclude that the students had been discursively constructed first and foremost in terms of their personal inadequacy, secondly in functional terms of their potential to address a staffing problem facing the educational state, and finally as liberal subjects deserving a second chance to pursue their ambitions (Stephenson, 2006). This formed the argument for my submitted paper.

The review

The writer lacks an ability to write with clarity and precision. He (I’m prepared to take bets that the writer is a male) is alarming [sic] prone to use unnecessary words and a [sic] convoluted sentence-structures. The total effect is infuriatingly fuzzy. There’s a constant feeling that the writer isn’t

exactly expressing what he intends to convey. My fingers itched to get at it with a red biro. Needs a complete rewrite.

Souder's (2011) review of literature relating to the ethics of peer review highlighted amongst other things, issues such as bias, conflict of interest, civil discourse and ignorance. With the benefit of hindsight, I now believe that the reviewer's response to my submission reflected unethical practice in each of these areas. In eight single-spaced pages my work was lambasted for: its focus on the programme about which it was writing rather than on one into which it morphed; for putting my ideas "into some kind of theoretical frame"; for presenting a "biased" account; for using "a rather cunning debating ploy"; for doubtful assertions, omissions, overlooked evidence and writing style. As an early career academic, I was prepared for advice that would contain elements of rejection and rebuttal from an expert reader. What I did not expect was a hostile reading of my work, my gendered self and my character. At the risk of falling into the same trap of erroneous assumption as I believe my reviewer did, I now suggest that the review I received and the outcome of the peer evaluation process, was more an expression of our competing ways of understanding the issue than it was the merit of the submission (Harrison, 2004; Shapin, 2012).

In a field of study such as education, competing perspectives can be firmly located within experientially-based tensions that have long existed between practising professionals and "ivory tower" theorists, or as Shapin (2012: 1) sees it, "the ancient debate between the active and contemplative lives". The red biro in the reviewer's comment above suggests the former. This supposition is reinforced by a protective stance towards the teachers' union in response to what it appears had been read as a carefully orchestrated assault on my part.

I have a strong impression that the writer is approaching the topic with a preconceived opinion: that the students, unfairly maligned as 'failures', 'inadequate', 'thick', etc. went on to become successful teachers and ornaments to the secondary teacher service. While it's true that it's possible to find occasional derogatory comments about the students, his account is biased. In this connection we should look carefully at the last paragraph where what seems to be a rather cunning debating ploy is used.

The reviewer, it appeared, was not happy, nor was he/she wrong about my opinion—a new perspective that, I believed, was a useful addition to the debate. As to my "rather cunning debating ploy" ... to this day I have no idea what that might have been. In summing up my argument, and intending to put forward the union perspective, I had cited a principal from one of the union's own documents. I believed I had represented their dilemma fairly.

The multiple ways in which expertise within one submission could be required places an obligation on journal editors when selecting potential reviewers to look not only for understanding of the topic of inquiry, but also for some degree of expertise in academic matters. Bias can also arise from intellectual conflicts of interest that compromise the reviewer's objectivity (Biggs, 2000). That the reviewer was familiar with the topic area is not in doubt. That was clearly established throughout the review. There was, however, an objection to my attempt to create "some kind of theoretical framework [which had] led to the references to 'ideologies' and 'embedded perceptions' and 'discursive construction' and 'legitimation' and 'student-centered rhetoric' and 'language of inadequacy', etc." (Reviewer). The objection, it appeared to me, reflected a theoretical naivety, born out most clearly in the critique of my comment that, having examined official documents and professional journals, I had concluded that the students "were discursively constructed in terms of personal inadequacy" (Submission). This was considered to be:

An appalling piece of jargon, which does violence to the generally-accepted meanings of 'discursively' ('digressively; proceeding by reasoned argument') and 'constructed' ('Fitted together, framed, built'). I take it that the sentence was supposed to mean: 'In discussions about [the students] a general assumption was made that students in the course were academically inadequate.'

(Incidentally, I take issue with the writer's use of the words 'personal inadequacy' [which] in normal language is taken to mean 'having some kind of personality defect. ... This is one of the many examples where I think the writer is not quite aware of what he is saying. (Reviewer)

The writing style was considered to be of "major concern": a reasonable comment if it were soundly argued and appropriately evidenced. If such a point of critique were to be taken seriously, however, it would need to be expressed with grammatical accuracy as well as the syntactical precision the reviewer felt was lacking in the paper. This, as evidenced in the initial citation above, was not the case. Less acceptable were the numerous patronising re-workings of the offending text—the work of the controller rather than the collegial expert—and the personalised attack which effectively supplanted any suggestion of disciplined objectivity.

I stated that when the Minister of Education referred to the students in an official speech as being "retarded in their degrees" this was evidence of "the on-going language of inadequacy". This was countered by the comment: "I can't for the life of me see this as 'the language of inadequacy.' Surely it is no more than a statement of fact". My reference to "the implicit objectives of schooling", prompted from the reviewer: "I suspect the writer doesn't quite know what 'implicit' means, except that it sounds impressive"; the suggestion that "meaningful access to opportunity became the goal of New Zealand's first Labour government" was seen to be "pompous"; while there were a number "appalling sentences", "wordy and awkward" comments, carefully rephrased. Nowhere in this "pointless interference" and "presumptuous meddling" (Atkinson, 2001: 200), was there one example of Souder's civil discourse or of constructive criticism.

"Experts almost invariably have strong opinions, sometimes quite emotionally held, about how issues should be studied, which findings and interpretations are plausible, who should be cited, how the writing should be styled, and conversely, what is impermissible", suggests Biggs (2000: 154). Bias and conflicts of interest are readily understood. Lack of civility, hostility and academic ignorance delivered as a personalised attack, as Stenberg (2003) states, can never be justified.

Concluding comment

Chris Harrison (204: 361) has urged that "[w]e should neither deify nor demonise peer review". It is a process that supports the development of new knowledge and new knowledge generators. The peer reviewed journal article and the quality assured publication have long been key mechanisms in the evaluation of scholarly work and in the employability of the scholar. Peer review is also a human process and an inescapable reality in the lives of the community of scholars within the university sector. In their hands it can be at best critical and constructive and at worst hostile and destructive with a potential to make or break careers. It therefore occupies an ambivalent position in the minds and lives of many academics.

In the current context where emerging scholars are facing the daunting task of gaining academic positions, an ability to confront what is at times a discouraging publishing experience requires tenacity and something of a tough skin. I suggest that it also requires a deep understanding of the idiosyncrasies of the process that can only come from today's more expert colleagues, and recognition that they, too, have once occupied that uncomfortable space.

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