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## Commentary: Peer reviewing 'A privilege and a responsibility'

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*Hands up those who've ever undertaken a course in how to review the academic work of another? That is, the work of a peer, an academic or post-graduate who has carefully researched and constructed a piece of writing that has been placed in your care for review. No hands? Peer reviewing appears to be a skill that, as academics, is assumed. A given. And therein lies a significant problem.*

Now, as an opinion piece, this article will not be subject to the review of others. I can breathe a sigh of relief in the knowledge that the critical eyes reading this will simply be those of the reader, not the reviewer. My research funds will not be in the hands of another, nor will my promotion, nor indeed my hopes of attending an upcoming conference. All of these things, of course, rely on the acceptance, or not, of our papers by our peers. They must be robust enough to endure the gruelling process of review and come out the other side intact by not one, but two people who may, or may not, have had enough time to read and review the paper thoroughly.

Putting our carefully researched and written work through this process is undertaken for two primary purposes. The first, crudely, is to jump through the Government's hoops for ever-elusive funding (funding which is diminishing as time goes by...). The second and arguably more important reason is to maintain the academic rigor and integrity of our university discipline. To achieve this, of course, the article should be peer reviewed by others who are well-versed in the area of research or writing. This second point, and all the ramifications that come with it, is the focus of this article.

There is much written on the role of the peer review – if you are a scientist. The web is full of guides and rationales for scientific publishing. This is not surprising, given the need to check the rigor of scientific findings, often quantitative in method. However, there is no less need to check findings in non-scientific fields, and principles of academic rigor and integrity, of course, apply across all disciplines. It was heartening to read in one such guide, "How to Review a Paper" in *Advances in Physiology Education*, that reviewing etiquette includes the following:

The reviewer should write reviews in a collegial, constructive manner. This is especially helpful to new investigators. There is nothing more discouraging to a new investigator (or even to a more seasoned one) than to receive a sarcastic, destructive review ... No one likes to have a paper rejected, but a carefully worded review with appropriate suggestions for revision can be very helpful. (Benos, Kirk, & Hall, 2003, n.p.)

My concern lies with the flaws in the system in which the thoughtless or rushed response of one can have a massive consequence on another. Take for example the following comment, offered in response to a paper written by a PhD student, on her second attempt at academic publishing. "The paper serves no purpose". There were other comments, like the absence of an abstract, which had been submitted but not to the reviewer. However, the other points didn't really matter. The comment, along with the rejection in the summary section of the reviewer's form, had already crushed the student's confidence. The brief response came complete with a typo and indicated that the

article's referencing was "not checked" – a response that was disappointing in its summary dismissal of the paper.

I have reviewed, and had reviewed, dozens of papers in the past decade. Most incoming (to me) were wonderfully full of constructive criticism. I would like to think that those outgoing (by me) were the same. The most recent included one review which suggested I read the published work of Jane Johnston to better familiarise myself with the area (true story!). Fair cop. On reflection, I had underperformed on the paper and I took on board the advice to, hopefully, improve it for subsequent publication.

Generally, it may require more work but surely is better practice to first highlight the positives, then offer suggestions for making the paper, if at all possible, better, publishable. Benos et al. (2003), cited above, also make the point "reviewing is both a privilege and responsibility". It is a responsibility because the feedback reaches an individual, who will be relying on a constructive, thought-through response. We should not lose sight of several factors in this process. First, in double-blind reviewing, such as in most communication journals, we don't know whose work we are reviewing. Second, we review under the shroud of anonymity and this should not be reason for a rushed or, indeed, condescending response. Gannon (2001, n.p.) makes the point that "many view the powerful role that reviewers play ... with suspicion, and feel that the anonymity of the process is contrary to the current demands for transparency". Finally, not one of us is without flaw. Who hasn't rushed a paper for a deadline or presented a paper that was a preliminary work, not as conclusive as we might have liked, or quietly hoped that a weakness might be overlooked by a kind reviewer?

We are careful with how we respond to our students' work. We know their work to be work in progress. We would be redundant if it was not. Using the same approach for our peers should be no less difficult. I am not arguing for the end of the blind peer review. Indeed, in order for our discipline, and all others, to grow and mature, we need to self-monitor and quality audit. In the words of one scientific editorial:

"The role of the peer review – anonymous and less democratic compared to the open discussion which follows publication – is to assure that the papers accepted and finally printed have the highest quality which is possible" (Klopffer & Heinrich, 1999, n.p.). Yes, there is quite a literature that offers guidance to those in the scientific field of publishing. Ironically of course, many of these fields are so well established, with so many specialists in certain areas, that they surely hardly need these guidelines. Perhaps the newer, emerging fields, like public relations, could follow the lead of the sciences and establish a set of guidelines for the peer review process, so that our PhD students and even those usually more resilient to criticism—us academics—might better weather the feedback.

We could take the lead from the excellent guidelines which exist for the sciences. Benos et al., (2003) provide an eight-point summary of reviewers' etiquette and responsibilities which include maintaining confidentiality, accepting manuscripts in the reviewers' area of expertise, and meeting deadlines. Perhaps we could work toward a best-practice combination of such guidelines. We are, after all, leaders in the communication field, professional wordsmiths. It will serve our discipline well if we build up and develop the writing of others, which will surely grow more boldly from words of encouragement than words of dismissal.

### References:

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