Writing about Learning and Teaching

in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations
across a Range of Genres

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"Writing a draft paper" (Reflection 24.1) was originally published as a blog post and is reproduced by permission of the author, Pat Thomson.

"What makes a good critical friend?" (Reflection 26.1) was originally published as a blog post and is reproduced by permission of the author, Rebecca J. Hogue.

RESPONDING TO REVIEWERS AND DEALING WITH REJECTION

You cannot control what the reviewers say. But you can control how you respond to their comments. (Annesley 2011)

When you get a rejection letter, do not take it personally. Be resilient. Be persistent. Be patient with yourself. Keep your sense of proportion. Above all, do not take the publication game too seriously. Along the way, enjoy every success. (Sadler 2006, 54)

Because writing is entangled with our identities as scholars, the inherently judgmental nature of peer review can contribute to our professional growth but can also be emotionally taxing. In this chapter, we extend the metaphor of creating and contributing to conversations to discuss the peer-review process as a dialogic one between colleagues—an exchange that shapes us and that we can, in turn, shape. We begin by unpacking the academic peer-review process, and we share some stories of how colleagues have experienced that process. We then address ways to make sense of reviewer comments and offer suggestions for revising your work and responding to editors, bearing in mind Thomas Annesley's assertion above of what we can control—our response. Finally, we focus on dealing with rejection, noting the advice of Royce Sadler that we should not take it personally.

The Academic Peer-Review Process

Submitting your work for publication means submitting it for review, either formal peer review, as we focus on in this section, or informal

evaluation by readers. Peer review is often framed as a form of quality control organized within scholarly communities. It is defined as:

> a process of subjecting an author's scholarly work, research or ideas to the scrutiny of others who are experts in the same field. It functions to encourage authors to meet the accepted high standards of their discipline and to control the dissemination of research data to ensure that unwarranted claims, unacceptable interpretations or personal views are not published without prior expert review. (Kelly, Sadeghieh, and Adeli 2014, 277)

The peer-review process is highly contested, however (Hirshleifer 2014; Rose and Boshoff 2017; Nature peer review web debate), because while it may ensure quality in some cases, it can also limit or preclude creativity, innovation, and productive development, and, like many structures, practices, and processes in academia, it was designed by and for a small subset of people. We do not delve into the peer-review debate here, but we note it so that you can keep it in mind as you join the peer-review conversation. For the foreseeable future, publishing in academic outlets will mean engaging in the inherently evaluative process through which colleagues make judgments—and, in some cases, decisions—about one another's written work. Such decisions have real consequences for careers, identities, and positions in scholarly communities. Consider, therefore, not only the experience of being reviewed by your peers but also how you approach reviewing others' work.

If you come to writing about learning and teaching from another scholarly discipline of research, you will have experience with peer review. A "double blind" review process is common in many disciplines where neither the authors nor the reviewers are known to each other—many journals publishing learning and teaching work use this approach. You might have experience with a single blind review where the author details are not hidden from reviewers (common in some PhD assessment processes, for example). Finally, "open peer review" is gaining traction—an approach through which reviewer names

and reports are published along with the work. While this practice is emerging in some scientific publications, we are not aware of it in learning and teaching journals yet. In the journal we co-edit along with others, Kelly recently employed a dialogic peer-review process that involved a reviewer, an editor, and the author communicating in an iterative process of feedback that included naming the reviewer in the publication (Yahlnaaw/Aaron Grant, 2019, 9).

When you submit a manuscript for consideration, an editor can reject or decline it before it is even sent out for peer review if the editor decides that the submission is not *in the conversation* of the journal or outlet or does not align with its aims and scope. Papers that make it past this initial screening to the review stage will likely receive one of the following responses:

1. Unconditional acceptance: No changes are required and the paper is ready for publication.
2. Minor revisions: The paper is accepted pending minor changes.
3. Major revisions / Revise and resubmit: The reviewers and editors require significant changes to the work that will determine if the paper is publishable.
4. Rejection: The paper is declined for publication.

In some cases, editors request changes without distinguishing between major or minor revisions. When substantial revisions are requested, the editor is likely to send the paper back to reviewers (either the same or new ones) to evaluate whether the authors have sufficiently addressed the requested revisions, though sometimes the editor may make this judgment.

Each journal is different, so the exact wording of decisions and the process will vary. Overall, unconditional acceptances of submissions are extremely rare (Brookfield 2011). It is more likely that you will be asked to make minor or major revisions, if your submission is not declined or rejected. Many established and top-rated journals linked to publishing companies (e.g., Taylor & Francis, Springer) have high rejection rates: commonly rejecting over 80–90% of manuscripts submitted. For these reasons, Thomson and Kamler (2013, 128) suggest that "minor revisions are, or ought to be, a cause for

celebration." While these statistics and reminders can offer some solace, particularly when you receive what could be perceived as negative feedback, Stephen Brookfield (2011, 252) notes that reviews often trigger "a familiar cycle of emotions" that influences the confidence of both new and experienced writers. Even very widely published authors get rejected quite often, so this is an experience everyone has and should expect.

Some common reasons for journal submissions to be rejected are highlighted in Table 28.1. If you are aware of these, you can try to avoid them as you write.

Table 28.1: Reasons for reviewers recommending rejection or substantial revision for articles submitted to *Higher Education Research and Development*

Reason for rejection or substantial revision	Out of 24 reviewers' reports
Weakness with regard to the conclusions and argument, including unsubstantiated assertions	22
Lack of methodological soundness or weakness in analysis	19
Absence of any important critical or analytical insight, including unfocused discussion	18
Failure to read well and engage a broad (i.e., international) higher education audience; lack of clarity on contribution to knowledge	18
Weakness in situating in appropriate literature	15
Weakness in quality and clarity of writing and structuring	13

Source: Based on Soliman (2008)

The Stories We Tell about Peer Review

Understanding the peer-review process is one thing; experiencing it is another. Kate Chanock (2008) has written about "surviving the review process"—a struggle through which we persist despite hardships and even "danger." Peer review can feel dangerous because our writing is entangled with our identities: we have invested emotionally and intellectually in a piece of work, and then we have to submit it for judgment by other people who are positioned as experts in the scholarly community. Thus, comments on our written work, regardless of genre, have a profound impact on how we see ourselves as members of a learning and teaching scholarly community.

Kate Chanock (2008, 1) urges us to share our experiences of peer review, because "many more things get rejected than accepted, and nearly everything gets sent back to be rewritten." By sharing these experiences we can come to understand that even though it's not "ever going to be easy . . . at least it doesn't have to be mysterious." Martin Haigh (2012) usefully includes the reviews he obtained, and his responses to them, in the article he wrote on writing success-fully for a learning and teaching journal. Kenneth Moore shares his first experience of peer review, capturing how it can be a complex emotional and intellectual process, in Reflection 28.1. Importantly, Moore sought the perspectives and support of colleagues and had time to make sense of the reviewer comments and the decision of the editor.

Reflection 28.1

My first peer-review experience

My first peer-review story was traumatising but ultimately very gratifying. I have the review framed . . . not the paper. No joke. The reviewer response was about as many words as my paper. I saw it and thought, my god, is this normal? Colleagues assured me it was not normal. Importantly, the paper was not rejected. The reviewer liked the kernel of the idea and liked the methods, just didn't like anything about the way it was presented. They had me

change everything under the sun (e.g., starting a sentence with "But"). I tried to find some humour in how painfully candid this person was. Luckily, I had the time and support of colleagues, so I did the work to revise the paper. To be quite frank, it was inspiring that the person had invested so much time. The end result is something I know I can be prouder of. Knowing that my work would not have been accepted into that journal without passing a significant check on quality served to instil my confidence in the peer-review system. It has motivated me to give more thoughtful reviews to others—while hopefully avoiding snarky remarks! The review stoked some negative emotions and set me on a difficult personal journey, but I now respect the process more as a whole.

Kenneth Moore reflects on his first experience of peer review as a PhD student in the area of higher education studies at The University of Melbourne, Australia.

Moore's reflection suggests he took seriously the "revise and resubmit" (or R and R) request from the editor. Pat Thomson (2019h) explains the work required in a major revisions decision:

> The key word in R and R is **REVISE—re-vision, re-imagine, re-think**. This may well be more than simply adding in a few sentences here or there or a new section. An R and R [is] not always going to be a "tinkering around" leaving most of the paper intact. Just adding and deleting a few things is a correction, not a re-imagining. In fact, most of the time, when reviewers recommend R and R they are looking for some pretty big changes. Gah—it's likely to be a pretty substantial **re-write**.

It's OK to take the time you need to process the experience of receiving a detailed peer review. You need to process both the emotions and the intellectual challenges reviews can pose. Mills Kelly (2019), an experienced history professor in the US and recent president of ISSOTL, has had to set aside harsh reviewer comments

for weeks before he could process them productively and "take the high road" in responding to reviewers. Sometimes a good laugh is the perfect medicine for harsh reviews. Following Alison receiving a particularly noxious review, Mick shared with her the link to a Facebook group called "Reviewer 2 Must Be Stopped." She laughed and laughed.

As with all dialogic exchanges with others, you have a choice in how you engage in the process of peer review. In chapter 26, we write about ways to give feedback through writing groups and as critical friends. Consider carefully how you review others so that the stories we all tell can be more gratifying than traumatizing and lead to more productive, less destructive conversations.

Based on his experience with peer review, Mike Duncan (2018) describes three types of reviewers; his classification can both prepare you for potential reviews and invite consideration of the type of reviewer you want to be.

- Type 1: Reviewers who are a credit to the profession by offering helpful and constructive reviews
- Type 2: Reviewers who do not read or engage with the entire work and offer misguided and brief reviews
- Type 3: Reviewers who trash a paper, whether in a single sentence or pages of text

Making Sense of Reviewer Comments and Responding to Editors

While it might be easier in some cases than others, try to tell yourself as you read reviewer comments that *this person is trying to enhance your work*. Sally Brown attests to that interpretation in Reflection 28.2. It can be especially challenging to understand and respond when you receive two or three reviews (from reviewers and editors) that are contradictory. This can feel overwhelming and confusing.

Reflection 28.2

Don't burn the reviews: It is so easy to misunderstand reviewers

In the days before electronic journal submission, I submitted a paper copy of an article which I received back with some very heavy critique requiring a lot of changes. Disheartened and a bit angry, I ripped it up, set fire to it and stamped on the ashes. Six months later I met the editor at a conference and he said to me, "Where is that good article on peer assessment?" I said, "You didn't say it was a good article, you gave me so many negative comments I thought you were saying it was rubbish!" And he said, "But I and the two reviewers had spent hours writing those comments and we had a slot saved for you in the very next edition of the [very eminent] journal!" Of course, because of what I had done, all the reviewer comments were gone!

Sally Brown is an emerita professor at Leeds Beckett University, UK.

If you think about the reviewers as colleagues with whom you are in conversation, you can respond in kind. After you have a sense of all the requests being made and if you decide to resubmit to the same journal, you will need not only to revise the paper but also to draft a letter to the editor outlining the changes you have made. Therefore, it is a good idea to keep a running list of those revisions as you make them. While you might not be certain to whom the letter will be sent, write it as if the reviewers will be reading it, and be specific about how your revisions address each of the reviewers' suggestions. Kelly has a standard template for responding to reviewers, which she created following a writing collaboration with a colleague. In responding to reviewers after a major revisions request, her collaborator drafted a letter and copied in every comment and then responded to each. It was long but it showed respect for the reviewers because the approach acknowledged everything they said. See the following online resources for examples of Kelly's approach: "Template for

Writing Reviews," "Example of a Review Using the Template," and "Example of Response to Reviewers."

Reviews that accompany a reject decision can still be important to inform your revisions prior to submitting to another journal. Keep in mind, too, that if you submit the manuscript to another journal, the editor may send it to one of the same reviewers who responded to it originally. Imagine how a reviewer might feel seeing again basically the same manuscript upon which they already spent considerable time offering feedback. In the process of responding to reviewers, you gain another opportunity to practice your writing. Table 28.2 lists decisions to make when responding to reviewer requests. It is a good practice to express your appreciation for a suggested revision, whether or not you follow it (Annesley 2011). Phrases such as "Thank you for bringing this to my attention" or "I appreciate your raising this point" can precede whatever you write subsequently. Reviewers are also human, and they too value respectful and constructive responses as much as authors do.

If you have not considered being a reviewer, you might want to. Reviewing others' submissions will expose you to the range of conversations unfolding around learning and teaching, including the most current literature being published on your own topic and related topics. It will also afford you insights into the review process and help you develop into a respectful and constructive reviewer—one who takes seriously people's efforts and offers thoughtful, useful feedback and suggestions. Revisit the advice we offered for delivering feedback in chapter 26. Offering thoughtful, useful, respectful feedback takes time and patience, but it helps build a more welcoming and inclusive community, and it can even sometimes be recognized. For instance, Alison spends a great deal of time on writing supportive, detailed reviews, and she was awarded the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Outstanding Reviewer Award for outstanding contribution to AERA's journals. Contact editors of your favorite learning and teaching journals to ask how you can become a reviewer. Most editors welcome new reviewers.

Table 28.2: Decisions for revising and responding to reviewers

Decision	Response
Agree with request	Say you can see how the request will enhance the work and indicate how you have revised
Disagree with request	Explain why you do not agree with the request and have therefore not made the suggested change
Reviewers make contradictory requests	Acknowledge their requests and explain why you have responded as you have

Responding to Rejection

"Rejection . . . is never nice, but you learn to manage by having alternative strategies" (Pells 2018, quoting Janet Ward). Everyone who submits their work to journals, with rare exceptions, has dealt with a reject decision. And we do, as Janet Ward points out, develop strategies to deal with that reality. Our Perspectives 28.1 demonstrates the different ways the three of us have handled rejection and how those strategies evolve with experience.

Our Perspectives 28.1

How do you deal with rejection in the peer-review process?

Kelly: "Welcome to the club, Kelly" was the response from a mentor when I admitted I had a paper rejected for publication. "You are in the academic club now. We all have had that experience." It was oddly comforting for me. To this day, when I get a rejection decision, I remember it is part of being an academic.

However, the more I get into the academic game of peer review, the more I want to push back against aspects of it. If I think a decision is unfair, I will contact the editor to discuss it. If I think a reviewer is being nasty, I'll contact the editor. Authors also need to be careful how they respond to reviewer comments. Recently, in reading an author's response to my and another reviewer's comments following a major revision decision, I wrote in my comments to the authors that I found their dismissive tone toward the other reviewer troublesome and not in the spirit of collegiality. At this stage, I am okay with a rejection decision and have the agency to engage in discussion with editors as I think the review process should be a collegial one.

Mick: Here are extracts from two reviews from a paper I submitted to a highly rated geography journal in 1999. *Reviewer 1*: "I find the argument about 'scholarship of teaching' highly unconvincing and lacking intellectual rigour and substance. . . . The paper is really about the status of university teachers, i.e. there is a political agenda here which gets very close to a self-serving personal manifesto which is, despite the occasional lip service to the situation in the US, very parochial." *Reviewer 2*: "The paper does not succeed in its claim that 'developing the scholarship of teaching can make an important contribution to the progress of geography'. All it does is to rehearse arguments about the relatively lower status of teaching without providing a convincing intellectual case. . . . The first paragraph under II contains a lot of platitudinous statements. The quotation from Prosser and Trigwell strikes me as being especially banal."

A few months later, after tending to my bruises, I began to consider other possible publication venues. I was invited to submit a paper to a special issue of *Higher Education Research and Development (HERD)* on scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). I revised the paper (with a changed introduction, conclusion, and title—critically as noted in chapter 9, dropping reference to geography and instead referring to "a discipline-based approach," but otherwise making

only minor changes) and it was accepted (Healey 2000). It has since been recognized as having an important impact and been widely cited. On reflection, I realize that the geography journal was not yet ready for an article on SoTL, but there may also have been an element of misfortune in who was allocated to review the article. By a strange coincidence the editor of the special issue of *HERD* was Keith Trigwell (the source of the "banal" quotation), though I did not tell him about the geography reviewer's comment!

Alison: When I first started submitting manuscripts for publication, I hadn't really developed a sense of how to write for an audience unfamiliar with the work I was doing, and I took rejections of my writing about it deeply personally. Over the years, I came to see rejections less as personal attacks and more as indicators that I hadn't found the best way to frame and present what I was trying to share—as a failure of communication rather than a failure of self. After nearly twenty years of publishing, almost all of my submissions are judged to need either major or minor revisions—cause for celebration, as Thomson and Kamler (2013) suggest, but I still occasionally forget how unfamiliar my work is in some circles. Recently, for instance, a colleague and I had a paper rejected because we had made too many assumptions about our reviewers' familiarity with pedagogical partnership, the main area of research and practice for both of us. One of the reviewer comments was so unrelated to what we were writing about that we thought maybe the editor had sent a review for someone else's paper! Then we realized that the reviewer was evoking the closest thing they knew to our work, trying to make sense of it. So, we revised to include more context for and explanation of what we had assumed would be obvious but clearly wasn't. This was an important reminder not to make assumptions, to start where the reader is in the way Jerome Bruner (1977, xi) famously argued that one must start "where the learner is." This is not a matter of condescension or dumbing down; it's a matter of being in conversation in the right key.

Your perspective: How do you or will you deal with rejection in the peer-review process?

Over to You

The peer-review process is itself in a process of evolution, but publication will always involve contributing to or creating a conversation, and none of us wants to be rejected or excluded from a conversation we want to join or develop. As you are joining the conversation constituted by the peer-review process, we hope you will think about the type of reviewer, as well as the type of writer, you want to be. As Tom Lowe (2019) has observed, reviewers have a choice: they can go in thinking, "What can I find wrong with this paper[?]" or they can ask themselves, "How can I help this person publish and succeed[?]" Some of the questions that you may want to think about following receipt of comments from reviewers include:

- How do you think you will respond to a rejection decision?
- Whom in your support network can you contact if you get a rejection decision?
- If revisions are requested, what changes are reviewers arguing for in your work?
- Are any of these requested changes at odds? Do any overlap?

   Then you may want to decide a few things for yourself and with any co-authors:

- Can you see how making the suggested changes will enhance your paper?
- Are some requests moving the work in a direction you are not comfortable with?
- Are some requests unclear to you?
- Do some requests seem irrelevant, because you have addressed them elsewhere in the paper or because they are more comments rather than suggested changes, for example?
- How, and to what extent, will you retain the integrity of your text while also responding to the reviewers' comments?