

Responding to Peer Reviews of Articles

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Invited workshop presented at the annual conference of the
Australian Association for Research in Education,
Kelvin Grove Campus, QUT, Brisbane, 30 November 2008

Abstract

The second half [of this workshop on “Getting Published”] is a seminar on receiving, ‘surviving’ and responding to reviewer feedback. Dr Robyn Henderson (USQ) and Associate Professor Patrick Danaher (USQ) will walk participants through a process of responding to peer reviews of articles submitted for publication. Using examples of their own successes and failures, they will also consider a range of other important issues, including dealing with rejection and learning from the review process.

Presenters

Robyn Henderson is a Senior Lecturer in Literacies Education in the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland, where she teaches into undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Her current research interests are multiliteracies, academic and digital literacies, and the implications of itinerancy or mobility on school-based literacy learning. Robyn has published widely, both individually and collaboratively, and is currently one of the editors of *Literacy Learning: the Middle Years*.

Patrick Danaher is Associate Professor (Education Research) in the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland. He is a co-author of *Teaching Traveller Children: Maximising Learning Outcomes* (Trentham Books, 2007) and author and co-author of articles published in journals such as the *Asia Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, *Educational Research*, the *International Journal of Educational Research*, the *Journal of Education for Teaching* and *Teaching in Higher Education*. His research interests include mobile communities, educational research ethics and politics, and educators’ and researchers’ work and identities. He has wide experience of engaging with referees’ feedback, including rejection notices.

Overview of Workshop

1. An orienting exercise (10 minutes)
2. Examples from the presenters' and others' experiences of receiving and responding to peer reviews of articles (15 minutes)
3. General discussion of responding to peer reviews of articles (15 minutes)
4. Some underlying principles in responding to peer reviews of articles (10 minutes)
5. Some specific strategies for responding to peer reviews of articles (10 minutes)

A rejection letter

We have read your manuscript with boundless delight. If we were to publish your paper it would be impossible for us to publish any work of a lower standard. And as it is unthinkable that, in the next thousand years we shall see its equal, we are, to our regret, compelled to return your divine composition, and beg you a thousand times to overlook our short sight and timidity.

Supposedly sent to a British author of an article submitted to a Chinese journal. Izraeli, D., & Jick, T. (1986). The art of saying no: Linking power to culture. *Organization Studies*, 7, 171-192, as cited in Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy, n.d., n.p.

A paraphrase of part of an examiner's report about a Bachelor of Education (Honours) thesis

Danaher will have to change his writing style or he will lose his readers in droves.

Examiner's report about Danaher (1992)

Reviewers' comments about Woods & Henderson (2008)

Woods & Henderson, 2002 – 3 reviewers, 3 opinions – Publish with a few amendments/minor revisions; Invite resubmission with major amendments/revisions; Publish largely as it is.

Woods & Henderson, 2008 – same story!

Reviewer 1 (minor revisions)

I think this is an interesting and challenging interpretation of Reading Recovery in practice and merits publication It takes an explicitly sociocultural perspective and offers an indepth analysis of a short period of a RR lesson. The conclusion is substantiated and issues about competence and what if really being learned are highlighted. The notion of RR as a constraint to reading experience and reading competence strikes me as significant. However, there are a few issues that the author might revisit and elaborate before the paper should be accepted for

publication ...

Reviewer 2 (invite resubmission with major amendments/revisions)

And the writers need to sort out some lapses of linguistic clarity, as indicated below:

- The use of confused metaphors.

For example, in ‘the washup of these narrow policies failing in their primary mission’ it’s not clear what ‘wash-up’ adds. Mightn’t it be better to say ‘when these narrow policies fail in their primary mission’.

The metaphor of inoculation (page 3 and passim) simply doesn’t work. There is no clear parallel between providing an early technical ‘fix’ for a presumed literacy problem and giving a person a mild strain of a disease to prompt the body to supply an antidote (inoculation). The ‘early literacy fix’ is perhaps closer to feeding antibiotics to cattle to deal with possible undiagnosed disease.

On page 21, para 1 from line 1, something needs to be done to sort out this sentence. ‘The competence with which Eloise appropriated and fell into line with the shifting ground presented to her ...’

1. Eloise is appropriating (taking possession of) something with competence.
2. She’s falling into line (has she still got hold of what she’s just appropriated?)
3. She’s falling into line with *shifting ground*. How do you do that? This contorted and impossible metaphor does not do justice to Eloise’s agility.

- Awkward or misleading phrasing.

e.g. the last 2 words in the following quote from p. 5, para 2, last 2 lines ‘... the basic assumptions of early interventions as a solution *necessitate troubling*.’ I would suggest something like ‘warrant investigation’ or ‘should be challenged.’

Similarly, p. 6, para 2, penultimate line, instead of the last word in ‘dogged by relentless dichotomy’, I would suggest something like ‘polarising controversy’.

Reviewer 3 (publish largely as it)

The paper is a worthwhile study, part of a larger and developing study of Reading Recovery, and makes an important case together with that work. It is certainly worth publishing.

Points raised from these reviews of the presenters’ work

An Orienting Exercise

Please form small groups and discuss the following orienting questions:

- How many a) positive b) neutral c) negative reviews of your work have you received? What did they say and what did/do you feel about them?
- What do you hope/want to take away from this workshop?
- How do you see this workshop as linking with and building on the earlier discussion about targeting and submitting to journals?

Examples of Engaging with Reviewers' Feedback

(all reprinted here with the authors' permission)

Example One (Henderson, 2008)

From: Robyn Henderson
Sent: Sat 10/05/2008 9:42 AM
To: Patrick Danaher
Subject: Revised Troubling Terrains chapter

Hi Patrick

I have attached my revised Troubling Terrains chapter. The advice from the reviewer was really helpful. These are the changes I've made:

1. I emphasised the risky nature of research involving marginalised groups in 3 places. I added statements to the abstract, the introduction and the section 'Focusing on one research project'.
2. The reviewer commented on my statement about expecting the terrain to be 'flat ... uneventful in ethical terms'. I have removed that statement from the abstract. However, I have left it in the introduction, as I think it is quite clear that this is about 'beginning' researchers. To make sure, though, I've lessened the impact of the statement by explaining that I did know that the potential for ethical dilemmas was always there. I have not, however, added references to the literature, as I did not think that the introduction warranted that. (see the next point)
3. I have added considerably (3 paragraphs) to the 'Focusing on one research project' section of the chapter. In this section, I have drawn on literature that talks about the way itinerant peoples have been ostracised, persecuted and exoticised, as a way of highlighting the importance of issues of marginalisation. I also added information about my reflections that prompted the research in the first place. I believe that this section now provides contextual information that highlights the 'risky' nature of the research. However, I have not explored particular 'conceptions of itinerant workers and their children in more depth' as recommended by the reviewer, as I think that this would move the section away from the core message of the chapter – which is about the ongoing ethical considerations that were important.
4. The reviewer commented that I could have noted the place of self-interest in research processes. I have thought long and hard about this comment. However, in the end I've come to the conclusion that I don't think it's needed. There is already one example in the section on Issue 1 that addresses 'family interests' vs 'my interests'. I think to extend that section would be to go off on a tangent that isn't the core argument of the section.
5. I've worked on the conclusion and included more detail. I have rewritten the final paragraph. I'm not sure if it's 'punchier', as suggested by the reviewer, but it is more focused than it was before.
6. I have taken the reviewer's advice on the minor points listed at the end of the review. I've made it clear early in the paragraph that the tattoos had not been seen by the community; I've corrected the verb error ('were' instead of 'was'); I've reworded the sentence that the reviewer said was clumsy; and I've added '[the student]' to make it clear who the pronoun 'he' referred to.

Cheers, robyn

Example 2 (McAllister, Hallam & Harper, 2008)

From: Lynn McAllister
Sent: Mon 28/04/2008 2:31 AM
To: Lifelong Learning Conference
Subject: McAllister Paper 87 revised

Hello Delma,

I have revised this paper substantially but I have not addressed all the suggestions from both reviewers as they were a bit at odds at times. I have made the changes based more on the track changes person than the one who marked it in pencil.

I have never done a peer reviewed revision before. I'm a first timer at being peer reviewed so I really wasn't sure how to go about making all of the changes.

Anyway I hope it is okay. It is a much better read than it was before and I have really taken the view of the track changes marker and changed the emphasis of the paper to talk more about eportfolios as a lifelong learning tool and taken the emphasis off the project. But with enough of the project to add some interest.

Please let me know that it has arrived safely. (It's like doing an assignment – gets a bit precious!!)

Kind regards,
Lynn McAllister

Example 3 (Hegarty, 2008)

Dear Colleagues,

I have undertaken the review of this paper, based on the two reports received. The following substantive changes have been made:

- Abstract has been truncated to 66 words.
- Introduction has been rewritten for clarity and outline of contents
- The philosophical framework has been wholly restated and augmented.
- Section on UBC has been expanded as requested.
- Some small sections throughout have been deleted (in line with reviewer 1 concerns)
- Some contradiction in spelling conventions has been corrected
- Some restructuring of the argument, along with an edit for length (8 single spaced pages in 12pt Time New Roman excluding references)
- Editing and correction of incorrect/missing references. There are also a number of new references as sought by reviewer 1.

I note that in fact, the first reviewer (dated 30 March 2008) did not at any time mention the research design – the reviewer recognises that this is a theoretical paper and therefore offers no design for the conduct of empirical research. I was asked to expand and amend the philosophical framework, which I have done.

I found the use of ‘track changes’ for purposes of review extremely difficult. Aside from the fact that it reveals the identity of both the author and the reviewer in the margin notes, the questions or concerns are simply not clear. A number of question marks were inserted in the text, which variously referred to references, claims made by me as author, and challenges to notions of lifelong learning. I have engaged with those I understood and corrected any anomalies I found, but some remain unchanged because I was totally unclear as to what was asked. I do not offer a defense for those unchanged inclusions, but rather an uncertainty as to what I was required to do.

There are a couple of theoretical statements, in relation to accepted tenets of lifelong learning by key theorists, which remain unchanged, as I stand by their value and application here.

The reviewers’ comments have been very helpful and certainly assisted me to develop a much stronger, clearer paper. I am very grateful for the spirit in which the reviews were offered.

Yours sincerely

Kathryn Hegarty

Points raised from these examples of engaging with reviewers’ feedback

Example Four (Tyler, White, Arden & Danaher, 2008)

REFEREE	REQUIRED CHANGES	CHANGES MADE
Referee A	1. Taken as a whole, the chapter does not present a clear and cogent argument and does not address the topic suggested in the book title, or the chapter introduction.	1. The revised version of the chapter (including the chapter introduction) has made explicit in a number of places the chapter’s overarching argument and its intersection with the book and chapter titles.
	2. The authors don’t seem to be clear about whether they are discussing leadership as evidenced by their own actions in developing their pre-service program; or leadership in relation to the requirements of teaching in the VET sector, and much of the chapter discusses neither of these, but focuses instead on conflicting demands in the sector with only an occasional nod to questions of leadership. The Findings section is particularly problematic as the data presented does not appear to have any relevance to the stated aims. The discussion section also doesn’t address the topic, but the paper is so diffuse that this is only to be expected.	2. While we agree about the importance of developing leadership in relation to building capacity among graduating teachers in the VET sector, the focus in the chapter is on leadership in relation to the authors’ actions in developing their pre-service program. This clarification has been made explicit and justified in a number of places in the revised version of the chapter. The Findings section (here renamed “Emergent Themes for Leadership Enactment and Change Mobilisation”) has been comprehensively revised to make explicit and to provide specific examples of the links between the presented data and the chapter’s stated aims. Likewise the Discussion section (here renamed “Interrogating the ‘FET Forum’ for Leadership Enactment and Change Mobilisation”) has been revised to explicate perceived implications of those links for pre-service VET teacher education programs and more broadly for contemporary pressures and possibilities in conceptualising and exercising leadership in and for changing university learning and teaching.
	3. I suspect that many of these problems have arisen from an attempt to take a set of data based on one research question and use them to try to answer a totally different question. The authors have the potential for an interesting paper here, but need to be true to the intentions of their original study.	3. While it is true that the FET forum was intended to elicit data related to the effectiveness of the FET teacher education programs, we do not see this as inconsistent with the use to which those data have been put in the chapter. This perceived link between program evaluation and effectiveness on the one hand and the argument for a particular kind of leadership in changing university learning and teaching on the other has been made explicit at the beginning of the conclusion and has been justified with specific examples in the preceding text.
Referee B	1. Seems to be two strands here – a) what is effective leadership b) a curriculum evaluation The paper attempts to bring these together, but the conclusion is rather banal i.e. that effective leadership is “worthwhile pursuing as a vehicle for...change in FET learning and teaching”.	1. The introduction has been revised to highlight the chapter’s purpose in bringing together these two strands of scholarship. The conclusion has been revised to make even more explicit the chapter’s overarching argument, which is that the “FET FORUM” and its aftermath functioned as examples of the effective enactment of a particular approach to leadership that the authors contend is worthwhile considering in mobilising change in contemporary university learning and teaching.

	2. More specifically the forum facilitators' reflection on their own leadership actions p.10 onwards contains much assertion unrelated as far as I can see to their actions. As a reader, I thought it a pity that you refereed only in passing to the most interesting intellectual question underlying this paper – the nature & purpose of teacher training for vocational education: it got lost in the busyness of leadership discussion.	2. While we agree with the referee about the importance of the question about the nature and purpose of teacher training for vocational education, we have had to leave that for other papers owing to a shortage of space. Nevertheless we have made much more explicit and clarified the intended relationship between the forum facilitators' reflections and the chapter's argument about leadership for mobilising change in contemporary university learning and teaching. We have also highlighted what we see as the alignment and consonance between the facilitators' words and their actions.
	3. Who is your audience? The intelligent but non-specialist may be deterred by the use of jargon e.g. "emancipatory" on p.5 is used twice, but not in a way I would recognize from its dictionary definition. Other words used inappropriately or obscurantially are e.g. "fossick" ("to search unsystematically or in a small way") & "teleological". What e.g. is "enactment leadership?" (p.8).	3. The revised version of the text has been carefully edited to reduce the use of perceived jargon; the four identified terms ("emancipatory", "fossick", "teleological" and "enactment leadership") have been either defined and clarified or removed.
	4. The last paragraph contains a complete about-face which is not sustained by the last sentence.	4. This paragraph has been rewritten to remove and clarify this perceived contradiction.
Referee C	1. There are some sentence structures that appear unnecessarily complex.	1. The revised version of the text has been carefully edited to reduce the complexity of sentence structures.
	2. Second paragraph the two sentences could be rewritten for ease of reading, particularly the last sentence.	2. This paragraph has been rewritten to enhance clarity and readability.
	3. The literature review section second paragraph has a complex concluding sentence which may need clarification for a reader not familiar with the topic.	3. This paragraph has been rewritten to enhance clarity and readability.
	4. Second last paragraph of the conclusion is also a little complex.	4. This paragraph has been rewritten to enhance clarity and readability.

Please note that in addition to these changes we have made the following change not required by the referees:

The discussion in the data analysis about the learners' perspectives contained in the survey questionnaire responses have been held over for a separate publication. This has given us additional space to highlight the argument about the FET facilitators' leadership strategies and hopefully to maximise the impact of that argument.

Patrick Danaher's and others' reviews of articles submitted to *Teaching and Teacher Education*

Article Number	Reviewer One	Reviewer Two (Danaher)	Reviewer Three	Reviewer Four	Outcome
One	Reject	Minor revision	Major revision	-	Revise
Two	Minor revision	Minor revision	-	-	Revise
Three	Major revision	Minor revision	-	-	Completed – Accept
Four	Minor revision	Minor revision	Reject	Major revision	Completed – Accept
Five	Minor revision	Minor revision	Minor revision		Revise
Six	Reject	Reject	-	-	Completed – Reject
Seven	Major revision	Reject	Major revision	-	Revise
Eight	Minor revision	Major revision	Minor revision	-	Completed - Accept

General Discussion

Some potential starting points (*but only if the conversation lulls!*):

- What are our shared and separate experiences of receiving, ‘surviving’ and responding to reviewer feedback:
 - a. the good
 - b. the less good?
- What are the shared and separate roles and responsibilities of:
 - a. authors
 - b. editors
 - c. reviewers?
- What impact does the intensification of academic work have on the character of reviewers’ feedback and on the challenges and opportunities for engaging with it?
- What impact does:
 - a. the extent to which we want to be published
 - b. the extent to which we want to be published in a particular publication outlethave on how we engage with reviewers’ feedback?
- Are there any parallels with and/or differences from examiners’ reports about dissertations?
- Based on your and others’ experiences of being reviewers and/or of receiving reviewers’ feedback, how a) effective b) efficient c) equitable do you see the review process?
- What other issues should we be raising about engaging with reviewers’ feedback?

Points raised during the general discussion

Some Underlying Principles

- How might we respond to “Danaher will have to change his writing style or he will lose his readers in droves” and similar feedback. That is, can we differentiate between who we are as authors and as people (our style, voice and identities) on the one hand and customising our writing for specific audiences and purposes?
- Being true to ourselves versus being ‘precious’.
- Being true to the purpose/s of the specific text.
- Potential tension between ‘not selling out’ and the pragmatics of getting published (but for some academics there’s no such tension).
- Dealing with rejection:
 - giving and taking criticism constructively rather than personally
 - possibly writing the review of the text one would have liked to received and comparing it with what one has received
 - seeing if there are parts of the feedback with which one agrees and with which one disagrees and if so why
 - perhaps seeking the opinions of others (the journal editor/s, one’s supervisors and peers, one’s friends and family members)
 - if deciding not to revise and resubmit the text (at least at this time), differentiating between doing so for pragmatic and strategic reasons rather than because one’s self-confidence and self-esteem have been damaged irreparably.
- Learning from the review process:
 - about the character, purpose and quality of our own work
 - about how that work is seen by fellow academics
 - about the strengths and potential pitfalls of the review process as a feature of contemporary academic publishing
 - about how we believe that authors, editors and reviewers should enact their responsibilities
 - about how we conduct ourselves as authors, editors and reviewers.

Points raised about underlying principles

Some Specific Strategies

- Focus on the content, rather than the tone, of the feedback – at least initially. (Sometimes, when revisiting some time later feedback we've considered negative and even destructive, we've found the reviewer to be more encouraging than we thought was the case at the time.)
- In the case of inconsistent, even contradictory, feedback among reviewers (or even within a single reviewer's feedback!), feel free to contact the editor to seek clarification of what you should do.
- Differentiate (and if necessary seek confirmation from the editor) between what needs to be done and what a reviewer might like to see done in the future and/or what a reviewer would do if s/he were writing the text.
- Differentiate between what an editor requires you to do and what you wish to do in revising your text – and also confirm with the editor that s/he is happy for you to do the latter as well as the former.
- Be as specific as possible when sending the revised text to the editor about how you have engaged with the reviewers' feedback and if applicable why you have done so in that way (including if you decide not to follow a specific recommendation by one or more reviewer).
- If you do decide not to follow a specific recommendation by one or more reviewer, consider contacting the editor informally before the due date for the revised text to explain your intended strategy and gauge her/his response.
- Avoid becoming involved in a long running debate about the respective merits of your text and the reviewers' feedback; everyone is busy and such communications tend to be counterproductive.
- Remember that you have a choice! You can choose not to revise your paper. You can choose to send it to another journal.
- Consider volunteering to review texts for journals, conference proceedings and edited books; you will be very popular with editors and also learn a lot about the review process.
- Master **one** referencing system e.g. APA/American Psychological Association (with or without the aid of EndNote!).

Points raised about specific strategies

notes

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Very best wishes!

We wish you every success in writing your articles, engaging with reviewers' feedback and reviewing other authors' work.

Robyn and Patrick

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