

The Challenges of Peer Review



06/05/2022

This post is about dealing with difficult peer review, particularly reviewers who are rude and patronising. It's made up of three posts shared in Facebook and I reproduce largely intact.

Dealing with negative peer review is always *interesting*

The gatekeeping of academic work by others 'in the field' sounds good in theory but in practice can sometimes be an exercise in humiliation for the author, and hubris filled ego stroking by the reviewer. I'm dealing with one such case. The reviewer is convinced he is right and I am merely an idiot who should be strongly patronised at every opportunity. He (pretty sure this is a man) has taken nearly 1800 words to do this repeatedly. Yet - after due anger, frustration and copious cursing, I have now begun to reach the point where I can stand my ground, argue my position and actually make use of his blind ego and sometimes sheer ignorance to my benefit.

I am aware I'm not the greatest academic writer that ever lived. It is after all only something I have come to later in life. But, in this paper I have not made myself clear enough in some things, and his reactions have demonstrated this. He, perhaps like many others in the academic community, does two things. a) they always think about learning in terms of 'direct interventions' to learn specific things (that they can usually test afterwards for 'effectiveness'); and b) he believes his critique is without fault, that it is only me that must read up on (in this case) edu blogging, measuring direct intervention effectiveness, the problems of Blooms and Solo etc etc. He even goes so far as to use my own words against me, to let me know I'm only at very basic level. I am actually quite shocked at his vitriol and intense humiliation of me. But he took 1800 words to do it so I must be touching on a very raw nerve. (FYI, Reviewer 1 liked the paper, thanked me for the valuable work and suggested 2 or 3 useful improvements.)

Tough peer reviews: email the journal editor

I'm being open about this process to encourage reflection and honest dialogue. I have nothing to lose by being open. So I emailed the editor. Emailing the journal editor can be useful, if you feel it's appropriate. I've requested an extension to re-conceptualise the paper to achieve more clarity and a more well expressed set of ideas (I need the thinking time). I also asked if he'd like me to do that, or withdraw. He said they very much want a revised version as they think it has 'absolute promise'. So, I'll plough on. But this email also gave me an opportunity not only to praise the journal, thank the editor for his support etc, but to feedback on the manner in which the review comments had been made as being problematic, not the comments themselves. He gets to know that patronising ego driven rudeness is not acceptable, and very unprofessional.

I told the editor that if I had been younger/newer at the academic game I would very likely have not emailed him and just withdrawn the paper, and the work would be lost. It wasn't a long email, but I got the point across. He's a good man and has supported me in the past. I got my extension and he said he appreciated the feedback.

Further points on the whole peer review issue

The key lesson to always take away from more 'perky' peer review comments is to realise they wouldn't be said

without having been prompted by your paper and its content, structure, topic or context.

So do a few things that in fact turn them to your advantage.

The first is to take your time, don't react straight away. If it helps to dissipate your anger and frustration, write insulting commentary responses in your private notes. I find this works for me. But I do not dismiss the comments, they have been made for a reason, and that reason for better or worse, is your paper and how you've written it.

After a few days of anger, panic and neurosis, you need to move on to being more constructive to try to re-navigate the topic of the paper and attempt to satisfy the reviewer. I ask myself the questions: should I write this paper, is it a justified topic? And, what made the reviewer say x/y/z? Ignore their rudeness or patronising tone, examine the deeper question of what is motivating the comment. For me, nine times out of ten I have not made myself explicitly clear about what I'm talking about. I have not explained in baby-novice terms a concept, idea or methodology. I have used a sentence which the reviewer is offended by, it's simply too hard for them to understand *easily* and they might be playing devil's advocate to draw my attention to this. Do not believe for a second there is very much (or any) tacit knowledge of your topic, or any grasp of the context of your work. It is your job to articulate that fully, but at the same time briefly - no one wants 15k word papers. I run into further problems because I refer to my prior other related papers and have to not just repeat myself, as that will be rejected by the review process. It is hard to progress through these challenges, but after all, it is meant to be hard. That's the whole point of peer review.

Then, positive things start to happen. In this instance my paper is about 'measuring' implicit (smart) learning. I am being challenged about whether implicit learning 'even exists' and how it is of relevance to smart learning/smart learning environments. So, I revisit various citations I've used, and also get searching in my bibliography using keywords like 'implicit learning' (it's not rocket science is it?). Low and behold I come up with diamonds of literature relevance and precedent, the jewels of argument. Stress drops away, I now know I will win. I just need to plan and structure well, to teach this reviewer a lesson. They have actually helped me to be more thorough, more reasoned, more erudite. When I resubmit, I always thank them, no matter how rude they have been.

This process is an exercise in developing your academic argument overall. Not only for the paper itself but in terms of how you approach your work, how you reason and articulate aspects of it, how you 'defend' ideas. It builds the detail of what you know and how you apply that knowledge. It is very, very useful, but at first it's stressful. Later, it's a celebration.

Image credit: Cover of Jorge Luis Borges Library of Babel, as featured on the [Open Culture article about the online babel library](#).