

Some thoughts about reviewing (Kate Chanock)

I'd like to address the puzzlement that some people have expressed with regard to the refereeing process for the AALL conference proceedings, or for the journal more generally. I'm not writing as any kind of "spokeseditor", which I'm not, but I do have long standing experience as author and referee for a range of journals, as well as an editor of LAS/AALL proceedings including this one. I think it's important to talk about refereeing from all points of view, and not just about the *JALL*, but about the kinds of experiences that we can expect when we submit a paper for review in any academic journal. Across our professional community there are people who've been negotiating these rapids for a long time (all wet and bruised; there is no other way) and people who are wondering whether to try to publish their first efforts, and a whole range of experience in between. I don't think it's ever going to be easy, but at least it doesn't have to be mysterious, so here's some of what I know. I hope we'll hear from others who know otherwise (or indeed the same). Towards the end, I'll get to the questions about the *JALL*, but first, in general.....

Many more things get rejected than accepted, and nearly everything gets sent back to be re-written. There have always been space constraints on what can be accepted, which are easing now that we have e-publishing; there's no longer a cap on the number of pages a journal issue can have. The constraints of interest, relevance, and quality remain, however, and these are very difficult things to judge if you're a prospective author. One journal's interests are not the same as the next (and if one journal turns you down, don't even think of not submitting to another! But first it's a good idea to consider addressing whatever problems led the first one to reject your paper...). Criteria of relevance change with all sorts of changes in the context of higher ed, and vary, again, with the audiences of the journals you submit to. At one time, and with one audience, the "call for" type of paper, where you argue that colleagues should do this or that to improve their thinking or practice, is fresh and timely; at another time, with another audience, it's old news. It can be hard, then, to tell what is going to be considered original, and what is considered to have "substance"; but reading around for a while, in the journals you're considering, before you submit is a good way to get a sense of this, as well as essential for finding the conversations that serve as a nest for your particular egg.

Generally, you need new information, or a new way of thinking about old information, and you need the new to be in dialogue with stuff that's already been published. A paper that does nothing beyond bringing other people's ideas together doesn't get through; neither does a paper that doesn't bring other people's ideas together. How much of this scholarly context you need is difficult to judge, as is how much background you need to provide, and what knowledge you can assume your audience brings to their reading. If you get this wildly wrong, your paper won't get through; on the other hand, if you get it somewhat wrong, it's one of the things that referees can be very helpful in commenting on. (Of course, you get referees who think you should have referenced more of their own work! But that's easily done, and the slightly soiled feeling gradually dissipates....)

Which brings us to the problem that people raised after going through the refereeing process for the conference proceedings: how do you deal with contradictory

comments from referees? And what is the editor's responsibility in mediating this? Again, I'd like to look at this generally first, rather than starting with the *JALL*.

In my experience as a writer, contradictory comments are not just an occasional problem, they're the norm. I've published over 50 things, and only two or three have ever been accepted without changes; and usually, there's some consistency between the referees' criticisms, but also some divergence. Quite often one review people is the opposite of the other. Here, for instance, are the reviews of something which a journal turned down:

Referee A wrote: "...the manuscript reads very much like a novel rather than a scientific report. As such the manuscript lacks a theoretical grounding in reading research from which specific hypotheses can be tested. No data is reported, from either standardised or experimental tests, and there was no attempt to measure objectively Consequently, as this manuscript is purely subjective in nature I consider it to be totally unsuitable for publication in a prestigious scientific journal such as the *Journal of Research in XX*."

ouch

Referee B wrote: "...ACCEPT – it's a delightfully off-the-piste piece, beautifully written..., and the only effect of trying to insist on more or more scholarly ... references would be to take the bloom off it."

The editor nicely knocked me back but suggested another journal, which did accept the paper (not without revision, of course).

One of the advantages of getting old is that I've got used to this (and keep my "how dare you send us this paper" reviews as reminders of survival), but I still go through the Seven Stages of Resentment:

1. Outrage, noise, unladylike rejoinders
2. Incomprehension
3. More outrage
4. One or two of the comments might make sense
5. There's a bit of truth in that one
6. I'll just have a go at doing what they said to do here
7. Actually, the paper is a whole lot better for all those revisions

At least, now I know when I start on 1 that I'm going to get to 7, so it all takes on a sort of ritual quality. But what goes on in between, and how do you try to please everybody?

First, you can't always. The extreme, in my experience, was a journal that sent each new revision not back to the referee who required it, but to some new referee who'd never read the original paper and set about bagging the changes, wondering why I hadn't done what I'd done in the first place, which they hadn't seen, instead... after a few rounds of this, I gave up and sent the paper elsewhere, and it was published.

But normally, you can go much of the way toward pleasing whoever you have to please, which varies. The revision, if "major", is sent back to the referee who required

it, who then declares him/herself satisfied, or not, and the editors then have to make a decision. If “minor”, the editors just read it themselves and make their decision, without sending it back to the referee(s). Whatever the case, you can decide that some of the comments are not justified and you think it’s better not to revise in response to them, and if so, you need to explain why your original version is better. Editors are reasonable about that, if you are. At the same time, they have to respect the views of their referees – it’s not a good look to ask somebody to spend time and attention reviewing a paper for your journal, and then ignore what they’ve said. So you need to do all that you can, in conscience, do to address the criticisms you’ve got. If you respond to most, and have good reasons for questioning others, that’s not a bad balance.

Comments that require changes come in various kinds (and here I’m thinking as a referee or editor, as well as a writer – I’ve received, sent in, and mediated every one of the following kinds of comments):

1. Your written expression isn’t very good (and this is sometimes the reason why a good conference presentation is not also a good paper). This is not easy to respond to, obviously; if you could write better, you would have done. But maybe you have a more literate friend/partner/mother/colleague who could read your paper and advise. Anyway it’s always a good idea to get them on the case BEFORE you submit, however wonderfully you write, because as we all know, all writing can be improved.
2. You’ve made a lot of careless errors. This is incredibly annoying to reviewers and editors, as it shows a lack of respect for the whole project. Best thing is to apologise and CORRECT THEM ALL. More papers than you would believe come back, after this sort of review, with just a few things corrected.
3. Some of the careless errors you’ve made were failures to follow the journal’s style guidelines. Why do people do this? (I was tired. I’d already reformatted it for 50 other journals and I had other mushrooms that needed stuffing. Why can’t all journals use the same style? They should love me for my ideas, not my APA. I was using a different version of APA In short, all the same things students say about not following their ref and presentation guidelines in their essays.)

Those are all problems where you just have to cop it sweet and make the changes if the paper hasn’t been rejected outright. Moving right along to comments that give you the opportunity to make the paper better in ways that you couldn’t have foreseen, or anyway, you didn’t

4. You overlooked some source or theory or body of work that is very relevant to what you were discussing. Just be thankful that somebody knows what it is, go and read it, and trowel some in at appropriate junctures.
5. You needed to explain something that not all readers of the journal are going to know about (like the difference between ALL and an American writing centre, or what graduate attributes are).
6. You didn’t need to explain something at the great length you did explain it at.
7. Your paper is about too many things -- either you need to sharpen the focus, or you need to make explicit what those many things have to do with each other.
8. Too much of the paper is at the wrong level of generality (too abstract or too specific).

9. You need to give an example with an idea, or to report some of your own work to give substance to what you're saying.
10. Some stuff needs to be moved around.

All of those, again, are the things we talk about with students day in, day out. And I think the best way that people like us can constructively review each others' papers is to treat it like working one-to-one with a student – same respect for the person and their efforts, together with the same respect for what the writing could become, but hasn't yet. Equally, the best way we can use this kind of advice, when we're the writer, is to accept that somebody with a bit more distance can see the problems we can't see, and is offering some expertise that will make our task of revision easier.

Exceptions to this are:

- If the reviewer didn't understand your paper when, really, they ought to have done. One clue that this is the case is when the other reviewer did understand it. If this happens, you can argue for some of what you'd like to keep, but also change some things that change is not going to damage; then the editor will be able to accept your paper without seeming to ignore the bad reviewer's contribution.
- If the reviewer wishes you had written the paper they would have written themselves instead of the one you wrote – this just isn't very grown up of them
- If the reviewer is just an emotionally and intellectually stunted, ignorant, bullying, rude and sadistic pond scum, in which case the editor is feeling for you, not for the reviewer. Of course, if your paper isn't much good, it still can't be published.

Right, now for the issue of AALL conference proceedings, up to and including the *JALL*. Here again, I've been author, referee, and editor, and I've had something to do with each of the proceedings, I think, since refereeing was introduced in (I think) 1999. Before that, we published everything, and I still think that was a good idea, because it got a lot of us into writing for publication. However, as I said at the time, it was daunting to see how sloppy a lot of us were in what we would submit – after all, we're not just academics, who are already supposed to proofread their stuff, but we're writing teachers on top of that. One colleague said she thought that was why we *are* so careless – after spending all our time picking students' nits, we're damned if we're going to pick our own. Be that as it may, the standard of submissions to our proceedings over the years has remained very uneven, despite the advent of refereeing. In years that I haven't been editing, I've felt sure that more of the papers should have been published than were – how could there be only, say, 10 publishable papers out of 30-50 that were presented at the conference? In years that I *have* been editing, I've had to acknowledge that some writers really needed to take more notice of their referees' reports. When you send those back to an author to revise with, and they send back a revision that doesn't really respond to the comments, or very superficially, and you send the paper back again (most journals don't give you that second chance, but I have done, often) and it comes back still not adequately reworked, and not even proofread, you then have to decide whether to do the work yourself or risk the author's resentment. I'm afraid we've sometimes done it ourselves, but I don't believe we should.

And what is the editors' responsibility in mediating contradictory comments? Should the editor tell the author what they have to do to make their paper acceptable? I'd like to hear what other people think about this. I know that no editor has ever offered me advice on this, which makes me think it isn't standard practice to do so. I think editors generally leave it to the author to decide which comments will help them to improve the paper, which ones they think are beside the point, and which ones they can respond to without damage even if they don't really agree with them. I suspect that it's not going to be good enough for an author just to say, well, Referee B liked it, so let's go with her opinion. It's good that Referee B liked it, and that shows that Referee B is an intelligent, cooperative reader with sound judgement, but even if Referee A is a slow-witted pedant, so might a lot of the journal's other readers be, and there's no harm in doing a bit to help them understand what you're getting at.

One editing practice I favour, though I don't know of other journals that do it, is occasionally to send a paper back more than once if it's promising and if the author is not very experienced in situating, or revising, or restructuring, their work, or whatever it needs (not proofreading!) I think it's useful if an editor is willing to do a bit of mentoring as well. It can take a while, but it can result in a really good publication. But it's not to be expected.

What we should expect is timely turnaround, and if you submit to a journal that just sits on your paper and doesn't get back to you, it's wise to ask them what's happening. Some of mine seem to have been used to mop up spills, stabilise uneven table legs, and other functions unconnected with publication, but the editor has either found them or asked me for another copy when I ask "about the progress of my paper through the review process". If you don't ask, you won't hear any more about it.