

Putting Refereeing into Context

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TEXT Editorial***Putting Refereeing into Context***

Scholarly journals rely on refereeing systems where 'experts in the field' assess, as peers, a paper for publication.

This assessment aspect of the referee's task is necessarily confidential and focussed on the paper not its author. The referee has to balance the paper against the need to maintain standards in a journal such as *TEXT* and in a discipline. When the discipline, such as writing, is new to the tertiary sector all manner of issues arise. Scholarship in new areas needs growing, those new to the discipline need encouragement, and yet there is a parallel need for rigour. Coupled with this are questions of how to write our arguments: What for writing constitutes a concern, what constitutes a way to argue that concern? What methodologies might we use, might we break down, might we fragment and renew? In more established fields fashions and sectional disputes dictate the accepted, but we (as a growing discipline) have fewer yardsticks.

This is complicated by the reality that in many tertiary education systems publication in a peer-reviewed journal equates into university currency. Refereed journal publication enhances promotion and employment opportunities; it helps create a reputation and assists further publication opportunities such as private collections of essays. Martin Harrison's recent book *Who Wants to Create Australia?* (2004 and reviewed in this issue) is such a collection where seven of the nine essays have appeared in earlier versions in various journals, *TEXT* among them. The currency can be more immediate - equating into research opportunities, research cash, conference and travel money or relief from teaching commitments. Whatever way the particular institution divides it up, the publication of a refereed article equates to expendable currency. The aspect of inclusion or rejection in the refereeing process then is weighted down by the accompanying act of distributing funds. The referees know this and it cannot but inform their work.

Further there are cultural differences which cut across this work. Australia, through the development of the research creative doctorate, has led the field in developing a research style for the discipline. But at *TEXT* there have arrived - from Canada, the USA and even the UK - papers most referees would like to see published but which do not apply a rigorous citation system (overseas writing in the field is regularly less academically oriented). Are these papers unscholarly? To exclude these contributions is gatekeeping at its most absurd.

Referees' reports, in the best of all possible worlds, also give suggestions as to how and where the paper could be modified for clarity or extension of argument. The feedback from such refereeing is invaluable. It is a closed confidential workshop situation - the meeting of two minds for a common aim. Truly useful referees' reports do not need to be lengthy, they need to be exact and able to highlight

precisely a paper's weaknesses or opportunities for extension.

As writers we are familiar with this process and should come to it with experience and enthusiasm. We all know the joys of a good editorial relationship in our publishing life and our occupation is littered with stories of great editors, or of journeys made to be able to 'work closely with the editor'.

Everyone's work can benefit from scrutiny where the feedback is usefully elaborated and perceptively in tune with the author's original concepts. A referee's report which only says 'This is wonderful, publish it!' is possibly as useless (but certainly more pleasing) to the author as the one which only says 'This is unscholarly, don't publish'.

But we cannot write about the role of the referee without also focusing on the role of the author undergoing this process. It is not a process where correspondence is entered into. Where a report is negative, the author is expected to accept the refereeing process and move on - either recognising that they mis-read the market (having sent inappropriate work to the journal) or that they need to embrace the suggestions of the report and re-work the paper accordingly. In our experience almost all re-worked papers are so significantly improved that they then slide through the refereeing system effortlessly. Some papers, of course, where clarity is the issue, have exposed in them fundamental flaws which need significant further research. In our experience most authors embrace the reports and are thankful of their peer's time spent on their work. Others, and they are few, have tried to enter into a debate, and are critical of the referees or the process. But the confidential nature of the refereeing process makes such responses fruitless. In these cases the disgruntled author is naturally invited to submit elsewhere. Happily *TEXT* is more often faced with issues from the other end of the spectrum, where an author has found the report so insightful they have asked the identity of the referee in order to continue working with that person. Again, the process does not allow such disclosure.

Lastly, it should be accepted that there are considerations in the role of the editors. It is our task to try to match papers with referees in a helpful and constructive way. We try to find a scholar who is interested in the area and who would be sympathetic to the approach taken. There is no point in sending a fictocritical piece to someone who loathes the form or a theory-laden work to someone who has a dominant focus on practice.

At the same time we are constantly encouraging new referees to engage in the process and mentoring them as required.

Every submission is read by the editors who also read and reflect on the refereeing reports. If there is a significant conflict in our reading of the paper then further refereeing is sought. We err on the side of encouraging and assisting rather than rejecting. As a basic rule of thumb the re-working of old ground is of less interest to a journal than the not-quite-perfect investigation into something new.

As editors our core concern is to the journal, making it an interesting, lively and scholarly publication which asks questions in the discipline and which helps to set out research paradigms. But the journal is healthy if there are sufficient scholars to write for it and sufficient scholars to act as referees. Both need to be nurtured, our editing role juggles these balls.

Tess Brady
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