The Persistent Issue of Criteria: An Editor's Reflection

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One of the questions I was asked when I was interviewed for the position of editor of the *Alberta Journal of Educational Research* (AJER) was, "what do you expect to be the most challenging aspect of this role?" Having given this some thought prior to the interview, I was quick to reply: "It will be to find a balance between guiding the author(s) towards a high-quality publication while allowing them to preserve their unique voice and perspective." After my immigration to Canada, the issue of "voice" as it relates to language has been at the forefront of my academic career. As a non-native speaker of English, I am acutely aware of the symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) inherent in the authority of those who possess the linguistic capital, "the fluency in, and comfort with, a high status-language which is used by groups who possess economic, social and political power and status in global and local societies" (Morrison & Lui, 2000, p. 473).

Although academic language can be specific to a discipline, the ability to communicate in the "high-status language" of the discipline is a challenge to those who not only have to make themselves understood in a foreign language, but also to make claims in that language from a position of disciplinary authority. The mastery of English as the "lingua franca" or "common language" (Crystal, 2003, p. 11) has become a means to academic success for many academics working in non-English speaking countries, as well. I am aware, therefore, of the (English) language challenges faced by academics working in non-English speaking countries who are striving to have their work published in English—and thus become recognized as members of the privileged group of "knowledge producers" and to have their "voice" heard outside of their local contexts.

What is heard outside of the local (non-English speaking) context, however, depends on each author's ability to communicate the message in the "common language" where the local/original meaning can be easily lost in translation. Given that the role played by language and meaning in defining and constructing reality has been a central epistemological issue since the "linguistic turn" at the beginning of the 20th century, the role of journal editor is clearly beyond finding/suggesting the most appropriate word that would make sense in the text.

I believed that my personal experiences, as well as my previous work with colleagues from contexts that sometimes have different standards and styles of academic writing, have helped me see the role of journal editor as an opportunity to help authors express and highlight to the reader what is the most important aspect of their research, rather than imposing my own views of how their research should be presented. Diverse voices, perspectives and modes of representation define research today, and any contemporary research journal should embrace such diversity: "After all, our thought itself—philosophical, scientific, artistic—is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggle with others' thought" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 92).

With the availability of AJER online, I believed that the possibility of seeing an increase in the diversity of voices and perspectives was both an exciting opportunity and a challenge that a new editor would face in maintaining the established quality of the journal.

Now, after being editor for nine months, I am ready to reflect on what "finding a balance" looked like for me in these times of "paradigm proliferation" (Lather, 2006) and epistemological plurality communicated in the Englishes of the world—"the remarkable range of language contact situations which have emerged as a consequence of globalization" (Crystal, 2003, p. xi). Since the beginning of my new role, I have sent close to 150 "editor decision letters," all of which were based on judgment of the acceptability/quality of the submitted research reports. A few of these decisions were my own but, in most cases, they were made in consultation or in accordance with the recommendation of my partners in the decision-making process—the editorial review board members.

Because of its long history (AJER is one of the oldest independent education research journals in Canada) and the hard work and scholarly reputation of the preceding editors, AJER has attracted and retained an exceptional group of devoted and experienced experts in different fields of educational research who generously volunteer their time to read closely, to give suggestions, and to advise the editor about how to proceed with submissions, while making detailed and specific recommendations to the author(s). I read reviewers' comments not only with great appreciation and respect for their expert knowledge, but also with great interest because I learn from their take on the submission as much as I do from the submitted manuscript itself! And we do, in the end, learn from each other as we engage in the "research-publication dance" until we all agree that the manuscript is either ready and it is accepted for publication, or that it is not of the quality endorsed by the journal, and it is rejected.

Although this process is well-known to novice and seasoned academics alike, what is less known, and perhaps can never be completely captured, is the "tacit knowledge" connected to our tasks. Polanyi's term, "tacit knowledge," introduced in 1962, has to do with knowledge based on experience that is used in making judgments that is always outside of the grasp of the language used to articulate these judgments. Being involved in the peer-review process in the last two decades as a member of other journals' editorial boards prepared me little for my role as the editor who, among other responsibilities, needs to glean reviewers' tacit knowledge.

Another major change for me has been my heightened mindfulness of the power bestowed on journal editors and the responsibility that comes with such power—by "simply" exercising their professional judgment, editors inevitably shape the field. Editors have no option of "avoiding difficulty of judgment" (Smith & Deemer, 2000, p. 887) either. "Judgment" is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "[t]he ability to make considered decisions or come to sensible conclusions" (https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/judgmentas). Having spent most of my (long!) academic life on the receiving end of editor decision letters, I must admit that I have had my doubts about the sensibility of the conclusions in some of them. As an editor, I now recognize that there is a danger that the editor's decision letter could indicate that "an individual has made a judgment, [that] criteria have been applied, but [that] engagement with the judgment and criteria has been denied" (Smith & Deemer, 2000, p. 887).

What does it mean, in the day-to-day life of an editor or a review-board member, to have "engagement with the judgment and criteria"? Or rather, who is engaged with the judgment and criteria? Although those of us who, by virtue of occupying the role of journal editor, are "granted a voice or agency to validate" (Hutchens et. al., 2017), are in a position of authority to judge the quality of the scholarly works presented to us and seem to have an understanding of what

constitutes a publishable article, there is no consensus model that we apply. In fact, scholars have expressed their strong conviction that "it is neither desirable nor possible to reach consensus about or prescribe standards of evidence in this diverse field. Such prescriptions, we believe, amount to "disciplinary action" (Foucault, 1975/1979) that constrain the generation of knowledge rather than improve it" (Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, Roulston, & St, Pierre, 2007, p. 25). From this perspective, an editor's decision to reject a manuscript can be seen as a "disciplinary action" that "constrain[s] the generation of knowledge." However, the notion of improving knowledge already implies that something could be done better according to some kind of criterion— "a standard by which you judge, decide about, or deal with something" (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/criterion). The lack of a consensus model, therefore, does not mean that each reviewer uses their personal judgment and that there are no criteria.

The very process of judgment can be seen by some authors as assimilation towards meeting "the demand of audit culture" (Lather, 2013, p. 636). Associated with the standards of educational research in North America, "audit culture" has been a point of contention among educational researchers since the publication of the National Research Council's *Scientific Research in Education* (2002), its reinforcement by the American Educational Research Association's (AERA) "Standards for Reporting on Empirical Social Science Research in AERA Publications" (2006), and its elaboration in AERA's "Standards for Reporting on Humanities-Oriented Research in AERA Publications" (2009). Although a discussion about these standards and the homogenization of standards by the largest association of educational researchers is outside the intent of this reflection, as a new journal Editor, I felt duty-bound to review the criteria by which the journal's review process was guided and to understand how these criteria have been applied in the editor decision-making process.

Although there is no single standard that any of the AJER editorial review members is coerced to apply, the journal's criteria are inherent in the questions the reviewers are to address while judging the quality of the anonymized manuscript. These questions are organized in four categories: Rationale; Contribution; Logic; and Clarity. As I was reviewing these categories and the questions listed under each one, I wondered if these required areas of "judgment" are perceived by some reviewers as more restrictive than enabling. The criteria the individual scholars who serve as peer reviewers—and who belong to quite diverse epistemological traditions, cultures and communities of practice—use in responding to these four categories are different but rarely explicitly stated in the peer reviews. Rather, they are implied in reviewers' suggestions for revisions, and in their questions regarding the research claims.

Hutchens, Paz, Vogt, and Wakeford (2017) point out that "[r]esearchers are routinely asked to legitimate their claims to knowing, knowing *more*, or knowing *differently*, and this demand is particularly acute in the current climate of research audits" (http://www.oarplatform.com/introduction-enough/). One could argue that by requesting certain revisions, reviewers and editors in effect direct individual researchers towards a particular norm, a standard upheld by our discipline—education. However, education is not a singular—"a body of specialized knowledge that has a discrete discourse with its own intellectual field of text, rules of entry, etc., and is protected by strong boundaries and hierarchies" (Furlong & Whitty, 2017, pp. 20–21). Rather, the authors continued, it is a collection of singulars, "a multidisciplinary set of discourses, each of which is broadly oriented to educational questions addressed from distinctive epistemological perspectives" (p. 21). It is the rigours of intellectual framework in each sub-discipline, therefore, that contribute to the strength of Disciplines of Education.

What my short tenure as an editor has shown so far is that the vast majority of editorial review members see judgments not only as statements that must be argued and justified but also as a place where they ground themselves as human beings and as educational researchers. They use the questions organized in the four aforementioned categories only as points to touch on in their reviews; most of them typically go beyond these designated questions, expanding and elaborating on specific aspects of the work that do not easily—or do not at all—fall into any general norm/standard implied in the questions asked of reviewers. The goal, therefore, is to improve the way in which the (new) knowledge is communicated, not to constrain its generation.

Reviewers' willingness to go beyond the suggested sections of the peer review form is particularly evident in cases when manuscripts contest the borders between disciplines or are "moving toward some place that might be termed a double science, both science and not-science" (Lather, 2001, p. 248). In such cases, both the reviewers and the editors need to remain open and "willing to allow the text to challenge one's prejudices and possibly change one's list and one's idea about what is and is not good inquiry" (Smith & Deemer, 2000, p. 889).

It seems to me that we have moved beyond the question of "what counts as science," have put to rest the methodological wars, and have turned towards acknowledging the "importance of epistemological grounding across paradigms" (Lather, 2013, p. 638). However, the issues of legitimation of knowledge in the field of education we collectively produce, especially when we consider it across knowledge systems, persists. The challenge is even greater for journal editors who feel called upon to resist imposing their own views of how research should be presented and communicated, following a narrow Euro-American cannon of research/data presentation and expression. As Smith and Deemer (2000) so eloquently put it, "If anything, to risk one's prejudices is a matter of disposition—or, better said, moral obligation—that requires one to accept that if one wishes to persuade others, one must be equally open to being persuaded" (p. 889).

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