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Peer reviewing as community building

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Presentation abstract

Peer reviewing is unquestionably the cornerstone of scholarly activity. It is universally seen as one of the very few ways we have to ensure that what gets published has been subjected to rigorous scrutiny by peers. Entering into this dialogue with other experts in the field is of tremendous benefit to authors, even if it hurts sometimes. But it is also so much more than that: peer reviewing helps us develop our own research and thinking capabilities, improve our criticality, and hone the skill of providing constructive feedback. Not only do we not need a PhD to do it, but we can also use it for our own professional development.

Peer reviewing is an act of service that makes us a better, stronger, and more resilient academic community. Like all acts of service, it relies on the good that is in us: being generous with time and personal resources, being committed to helping others, having a sense of reciprocal responsibility, feeling a constant desire to learn, and being open to dialogic exchange with authors and editors. I believe it is this dialogic exchange that brings us together as a community. In this mini keynote, I posited that the more we review, the closer we become to the ideas that we share, and to each other. As Co-Lead Editor of the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education* (*JLDHE*), the questions I was interested in exploring included:

1.   How do we ensure that every voice feels valued in peer review?
2.   How do we encourage sharing diverse perspectives to achieve better publishing outcomes?
3.   How do we attract peers to reviewing and use their goodwill to build a strong, proud, and sustainable scholarly community in learning development?

Community response

Alicja Syska's emphasis upon peer review as a form of constructive dialogue enabling a strong and sustainable scholarly community resonated for attendees at her session. It has been brought to life, too, in the innovative process of collaborative writing and editing used to create this edition of the *JLDHE.* As the community reflections below indicate, discussion of the session's three questions enabled the community to enter a conversation that facilitated transformation of their own understanding of peer review and energised them to participate within the process as part of the *JLDHE* community:

> The session made me think differently about the peer review process. The emphasis on a supportive and community-based approach that promotes dialogue is so refreshing, and quite different from previous experiences of peer review that many of us may have had. Finding out about the more open way of working and the support available for peer reviewers means that I would certainly feel encouraged to participate in the future.

> This was a much-needed session, particularly for potential new reviewers hesitantly sitting on the periphery pondering whether to jump in the peer review pool and get wet or stay dry on the water's edge. Talking through the perceived concerns around being a peer reviewer gave opportunity to reflect on personal perceptions and experiences of peer reviewing and being reviewed. Having had this opportunity to discuss, and reflect, I have been motivated and feel encouraged to add my name to the reviewers' list.

> I really appreciated the emphasis on supporting new reviewers, providing constructive feedback to writers, and the sense of community building within our field of learning development through the *JLDHE* Reading Club. This is a very innovative and different approach to publishing, and makes the process much more accessible, transparent, and justifiable in terms of the time and effort needed to publish and/or take part in the reviewing process.

Author's reflections

The day before I was to deliver this keynote someone on Twitter called out peer review as resembling a dating app. It resonated with a lot of people, including myself, because peer review does at times seem to work like one. You submit your carefully written 'profile', wait to be lovingly embraced for a very long time (during which you cannot 'date' anyone else), and you still might get 'swiped left' as a desk rejection or utterly destroyed by Reviewer 2, whose ideal type is far removed from what you see in your mental mirror. For many, this is not a positive experience, although I do concede evidence shows that 'matches made in heaven' are also possible.

Nonetheless, at the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, we do everything we can to resist this negative model. We do not want to build a 'dating app'; we want a community building app, where peer reviewing is an act of service that brings out the best in us and makes us feel closer to each other. So ultimately, the question I posed to the participants in my three roundtable discussions was: how do we build a better (peer-reviewing) app?

All three session rounds were interesting and compelling in different ways, as each group of participants had a different dynamic, but they all brought similar issues to the fore: mainly, the obstacles that stop us from engaging with peer review as a scholarly service. It will be of no surprise to anyone that the key obstacle was 'time' – a commodity hard to secure in HE and even harder to commit to acts of service. The second one, very much linked with time, was 'value' – peer review is simply not perceived as an activity yielding high returns. With limited recognition, it must rely on our generosity and ability to see the hidden rewards (learning from and helping others, professional development, contribution to the growth of the field). Other concerns, from the perspective of the recipients of peer review, included the perception of hierarchy and power, which often results in lack of fairness to authors who have to navigate impossible demands from conflicting feedback. Lastly, some participants were concerned that they may not be equipped to offer peer review, as they did not see themselves as clear 'experts' in the field, but rather novices in need of support.

To those concerns, we have some answers at the *JLDHE*. When it comes to recognition, we have introduced Reviewer of the Year awards (with the fabulous Lee Fallin and Samantha Ahern being our first winners this year). We also encourage our reviewers to set up a profile on Publons and evidence their work there. We open our calls for peer review

to the entire LD community on the LDHEN jiscmail list, not only to widen our reach but also to inspire engagement. Our editors then work closely with peer reviewers and support them in the process. For example, we offer new reviewers the position of third or fourth reviewer, to minimise the burden of making the 'right' decision; we share the (anonymous) reviews with all reviewers so they can see it as a developmental activity; and we engage in dialogue, which provides feedback and opportunities for further development. Finally, in a serendipitous response to one of the participants who suggested having a forum to discuss articles published by the journal, we run a Reading Club that does exactly that – so I was really pleased to see that our actions align with our community's needs and expectations.

The roundtable talks were a fabulous opportunity not only to discuss what stops us from engaging in peer review but also to share the initiatives *JLDHE* has been implementing in order to improve the experience for everyone involved in the process. There were more ideas from the participants that we will consider, such as introducing authors' reflections on peer review and authors' responses to the peer review forms, so watch this space! I was also really pleased to hear many attendees expressing a renewed interest in peer reviewing and I look forward to developing these relationships and working with these new reviewers in future. I will finish this reflection with the words that stuck with me the most: Steph Allen said we are like 'angels dancing on pinheads'. I know that the phrase has a dark underlying meaning – supposedly referring to pointless academic debates with no intrinsic value (whose historical roots have been questioned, however) – but as she expressed it, it does convey something compelling: peer reviewing as community building is a delicate work that takes vision, persistence, and imagination, with no guarantees for success. And we at the *JLDHE* are willing to take on the challenge.

Further resources

JLDHE Reading Club: https://journal.aldinhe.ac.uk/index.php/jldhe/readingclub
LDHEN jiscmail list: https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=ldhen

Acknowledgments

Author details

Alicja Syska is a hybrid academic, combining roles in learning development with lectureships in Education and History at the University of Plymouth. She is a Senior Fellow of Advance HE and a Certified Leading Practitioner of LD. Her research interests include writing in disciplines, blended learning, student perceptions of their university experience, community building through writing, and the development of LD as a discipline. She serves as Co-Lead Editor of the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*.