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EDITORIAL

Peer review – collegiality and kindness: A boost to academic rigour

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A witty comment has been circulating on social media; it amuses many, including no doubt the author of the comment. It is a response to a student asking why they had been given low marks on a research assignment:

> Actually you did not submit a research paper. You turned in a random assemblage of sentences. In fact, the sentences you apparently kidnapped in the dead of night and forced into this violent and arbitrary form, clearly seemed to be placed on the pages against their will. Reading your paper was like watching unfamiliar uncomfortable people interacting at a cocktail party that no one wanted to attend in the first place. You did not submit a research paper. You submitted a hostage situation.

So humorous – such vivid analogies – but so unkind! And what would the student author have learned from such remarks?

Academics everywhere have received essays, reports, and thesis chapters that were thin, ill-prepared, and hastily (dis-)organised. Yet, surely, as teachers, those markers have a responsibility to help students learn, to build their research and writing skills, and to gain from every assignment. Good teachers not only enable and ensure the learning of theories, concepts, discourses, and facts, but they also teach how to research and to communicate appropriately and cogently within the discourse of the discipline or genre.

It is just the same with peer reviewing. In these times, when academic publishing is under question from all corners, it is essential that peer reviews of journal articles should be fair, thorough, and scholarly. That means that peer reviewers should not only have expertise in the area of the article they are reviewing, but also they should be collegial, rigorous, and kind. That is the realistic ideal.

Yet, just like the witty, cutting marker's remarks above, famous (and easier to write?) are the acerbic and negative peer reviews of articles from reviewers who smash articles and dash hopes. In this short essay, I would like to survey the negative and then make a case for the positive, with (yet another?) checklist for peer reviewers who are aspiring to be collegial, rigorous, and kind. It is wholly true that peer review is one of the great, unrewarded academic activities, but it is vital for building scholarship in all fields and should be done well. That means kindness and respect are needed. Such collegiality does not contradict ideals of rigour and scholarship – rather, offering scholarly expertise and commentary in clear and helpful ways builds scholarly rigour.

In a recent discussion among journal editors, one of them bewailed problematic attacking reviews which had necessitated sending articles out to a third reviewer. And then a week or two later, a couple of reviews came into *ELRR* that were similarly disappointing – not only for the outcome but for their *ad hominem* attitude and lack of collegiality. Almost all academics have received disappointing reviews of articles submitted to journals – that is the basis of peer-reviewed scholarship. However, there is an important difference between, on the one hand, a review that states its concerns with an article and includes recommendations on how revisions might remedy those concerns and, on the other hand, a review that either vaguely or wordily attacks the author's research, their approach or methods – or even attacks them personally. These latter reviews are of no use to anyone, except perhaps a fleeting schadenfreude for the vindictive reviewer.

Now some may disagree. There is always a tension about what comprises good reviewing. There are those reviewers who believe intellectual bloodbaths are the only way to achieve academic rigour. The logic is that only by smashing someone will you get a good article – if you are too 'soft' on authors, they will become complacent or churn out rubbish. These are the believers in the nineteenth-century English public school assumptions that progress is only achieved through violent punishment.

Certainly, they are not isolated. Scholars and teachers everywhere are frequently entertained by social media sites aimed at highlighting the attributes of poor academic reviews, including Facebook's 'Reviewer 2 Must Be Stopped!' and Tumblr's https://shitmyreviewerssay.tumblr.com/. (The reference to Reviewer 2 is to the famed and mostly mythical anti-author, pro-rejectionist, reviewer who is neither helpful nor collegial.) On these sites, novice and experienced scholars regale readers with foolish and nasty assertions, often vague, and of no value to the author. Like the marker discussed at the outset, reviewers are reported to return articles with comments that are sharp and savage, often replete with admiration of their own wit, such as follows:

> . . . the authors seem to be reinventing the wheel and a flat tire to go along with it.
>
> I am generally very happy to provide extensive suggestions and comments on manuscripts, but this submission was an absolute waste of my time.
>
> Maybe this paper could be suitable for a journal with readers in statistical fruit-growing or mango mathematics, if such journals exist.

These 'Reviewer 2'-type comments may give the reviewer a puff of self-consequence, but they offer nothing that will assist the author to improve their article.

Similarly undesirable are reviewers who claim to have expertise in the discipline of the authors but who ultimately fail to read the article properly or perhaps misunderstand core concepts. A multidisciplinary journal like *ELRR* is perhaps more challenged than most to finding the right and best available reviewers. For example, terms like *rent-seeking* and *wage discrimination* have important and particular meanings for economists. All disciplines of course have their own special language, discourse, and values, but that means that an economist's article on rent-seeking should not be sent to a sociologist who probably has little knowledge of the particular and significant meaning ascribed to the term by economists and who, thus, may interpret the assumptions and arguments quite incorrectly. (Reviewers who do not understand the methods/theories/terms of an article should always communicate with their associate editors.)

Other problem reviewers include the lazy and the vague. They proffer minimalist statements like 'this article just is not up to standard' and 'I liked the introduction but after that it was a waste of my time'.

Well, bully for you, dear reviewer, but the author has learned nothing from their research, writing, and submission of their article. The reviewer probably feels immensely superior, but they have not shared one whit of their knowledge or experience with the author.

Finally, in this slice of the pantheon of inadequate scholarly reviewers, there are the *ad hominem* reviews that sneer, smear, and destroy the author's ideals and approaches – the sites 'Reviewer 2 Must Be Stopped!' and https://shitmyreviewerssay.tumblr.com/ are rich in these kinds of examples:

> The authors' past work (which is related closely to this) has gained some attention in the community: most of this is due to the wrong reasons.
>
> In my opinion, this is a fundamental wrong approach. (end of review)
>
> I am personally offended that the authors believed that this study had a reasonable chance of being published in a serious academic journal . . .
>
> This script is awful. It uses all the wrong sources. (end of review)

There are other poor reviewing practices – we heard recently of 'coercive citation' where reviewers insist that for the submitted article to be publishable, their own work is cited (Basil et al 2023); similarly, there are reviewers who think any new manuscript that does not cite formerly important scholarship from fifty years ago, has no real appreciation of the field, and so must be rejected immediately.

And yet . . . ? And yet . . . ? There are many, many good and great reviewers, those reviewers who use their expertise, scholarship, and collegiality to provide kind and thorough reviews. We journal editors do not recognise or praise them enough; they should be hailed, promoted, and given a substantial pay rise, for their work in making an important contribution to scholarship in their discipline. In providing knowledgeable, kind, and thorough reviews of a recently submitted article, they are truly adding strength to the field of study. One author's research will be so much better – and that is a gain for all.

So what does this wonderful good and great reviewer do? These ideals will vary from discipline to discipline – economists and psychologists always give weight to methods, while sociologists and labour relations scholars tend to evaluate the structure of the article and the choice and thoroughness of analysis and primary sources. But there are shared attributes of good reviews, and eventually *ELRR* hopes to develop guidelines for novice (and practised) reviewers. This is the start to those guidelines.

Attributes of good reviews

A good review always (is) . . . . :

1. **Organised, timely, and clear**
   A good review spells out what is excellent and what needs work, lucidly and cogently.
2. **Comments on most aspects of the article**
   A good review evaluates the objectives, literature review, methods, findings, analysis, and conclusion – and asks whether the research, the objectives, analysis, and findings all align with each other.

3. **Collegial, tolerant, non-ethnocentric, and ethical**
   A good reviewer approaches the article aware of biases and prejudice but focuses on the nature of the article within a field of study, not on stereotypes or assumptions.
4. **Models good communication in assisting authors improve their writing**
   The good reviewer does not have to copy-edit the whole article – there are experts and machines to do that. On the other hand, if an article is poorly written, the good reviewer explains *how* communication is inadequate and gives a few examples of *what* might be done to improve it.
5. **Constructive and comprehensive**
   The good review is written as if the reviewer were in partnership (not in competition) with the author – sharing ways in which the author's work might be improved from the abstract to the conclusion.

These seem basic to many, and perhaps they are. However, the social media sites attest to the evidence that peer reviewing is an important, but underrated, skill that needs work, if only so we don't gain fame for the wrong sorts of reviews!

And in this issue . . . ?

As usual, we have an array of terrific articles with a broad theme of seeking fairness and equity. In the first article, Morris starts his exploration of the ways in which education in Australia feeds into and perpetuates inequality from early childhood to university in his article, 'Inequality and education in Australia'. It is a sobering study, especially of education in a country that once prided itself on its egalitarianism. It is the same with Elgin and Elveren's analysis of survey data from Syrian refugee workers in Turkey. In their article, 'Wage-productivity gap and discrimination against Syrian refugees: Evidence from Turkey', the authors find some important statistical relationships in their investigation of the correlation between the wage-productivity gap and the perception of economic and social discrimination. They offer some very useful recommendations for policies that will improve conditions for a large refugee labour force. Huang, Jin, and Fan find a different kind of wage gap in their study of the effect of the universal two-child policy on the gender wage gap in urban China, where they demonstrate that the universal two-child policy since 2016 has significantly expanded the gender wage gap but that the changes were varied according to education and age.

Diallo and Ronconi explore institutional effectiveness and enforcement of labour law and regulation in their very interesting article, 'Beyond the Law-in-the-Books: Labour Enforcement in Senegal'. They find that strong law with weak implementation or enforcement has serious negative implications, especially given the lack of effective representation of vulnerable workers in the policymaking process.

Still considering equity and inclusiveness, Yeerken and Feng take a much more global approach in their study, 'Does digital service trade (DST) promote inclusive growth?', based on panel data from 46 countries from 2005 to 2019. Their findings are mixed in this provocative article, noting that DST substantially promotes social equity and inclusiveness, but it also increases carbon emissions, and so impedes environmentally sustainable growth. Sanchez-Sanchez and Puente also draw on a broad-based population in their analysis, 'Bullying at work: Differential pattern in Euro-Area according to gender-based disparities'. Drawing on both descriptive analysis and econometric analysis, the authors find, *inter alia*, that gender differences depend on awareness of equality and the level of economic participation and opportunities.

By contrast Wen, Qiu, and Huang focus on defined geographical locations to explore changing income welfare in their study, 'Impact of e-commerce development on rural income: Evidence from counties in revolutionary old areas of China'. Like much recent research, they find that digital technology has enormous dividend potential in rural revitalisation in some regions. In a similar fashion in 'Exploring job (de-)routinisation, premature deindustrialisation, and informal labour interactions: Evidence from Morocco', El Mokri, El Abbassi, and Ibourk explore the (de-)routinisation of employment structures in developing countries, through the case of Morocco, focussing on understanding the interplay between the dynamics of occupational employment composition, focussing particularly on the level of routine tasks intensity and two structural aspects: premature deindustrialisation and the prevalence of informal labour. Another perspective of the rapid advancement of digitalisation can be found in 'A spatial perspective on the impact of digital financial inclusion on labour force employment structure: Evidence from Chinese cities'. In the article, Hu and Lu draw on panel data from 258 prefecture-level cities in China from 2011 to 2021, to evaluate the impact of digital financial inclusion on the employment structure of the labour force and investigate its spatial spillover effects, including new forms of employment. The article from Wang, Sun, and Tong wins a prize for a provocative and novel title. Drawing on a famous study of the development of workplace accident law in the USA (Witt 2004), the article, 'The redemption of the Accidental Republic: 70 years of Chinese workers' compensation insurance', explores the history of Workers' Compensation Insurance (WCI), through analysis of the development, effectiveness, and problems of WCI in China. The authors demonstrate the importance of improving legislative elements and the regulatory WCI system for stronger labour protection. Finally, we have 'Death at Dreamworld: Ten Pathways to Disaster and Failure to learn' where Gregson and Quinlan draw on the ten pathways model to identify latent failures that have been associated with death and disaster in workplaces. This thoroughly researched article tests and expands the model, taking as a case study the tragic 2016 Thunder River Rapids ride (TRR ride) disaster at the Dreamworld theme park in Queensland, Australia. In so doing, the authors highlight the role of poor maintenance, inadequate management systems, regulatory failure, and the lack of oversight.

Contested terrains, book reviews, and a new CFP

The *ELRR* started publishing articles under the Contested Terrains banner in 2020. These articles are generally briefer than traditional academic articles and may be more passionate, provocative, or polemical. However, they are also required to cite sources appropriately and avoid op-ed type opinion making. Rather, Contested Terrains articles seek to provoke or build scholarly/policy debates by offering research on immediate, emerging, or controversial issues. Contested Terrains articles, which are normally about 3,000–4,000 words, are double-blind peer-reviewed (as are all research articles in *ELRR*), but reviewers are reminded of the particular objectives and parameters.

The Contested Terrains article in this issue is titled 'Clive Palmer's claims against Australia for billions renew pressure to remove investor rights to sue governments from trade agreements'. The author, public intellectual Patricia Ranald, seeks to provoke debate on the processes whereby governments introduce 'specific legal rights in trade agreements for foreign (but not local) investors to be able to claim billions in compensation if they can convince an international tribunal' that they are disadvantaged by a change in law or policy, regardless of national issues of public good, health, or environmental regulation. These rights are known as investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS). But what if an investor is a local citizen with an overseas business? Given that ISDS-type regulations are prevalent

across the world, Ranald shows how this is much more than an Australian issue – and, we hope, will provoke scholarly debate.

Two wonderful book reviews follow. First is Michael Quinlan's review of *Regulating Gig Work: Decent Labour Standards in a World of On-Demand Work* by Michael Rawling and Joellen Riley Munton (2024), and then Braham Dabscheck offers a review of *Fulfilling the Pledge: Securing Industrial Democracy for American Workers in a Digital Economy* by Roger C. Hartley. Book reviews are one of the great losses of audit-age academia, although they are always appreciated by readers, and can be immensely useful for reviewers to develop writing capabilities or fully appreciate genres and subfields. We at *ELRR* always welcome book reviews, and we are always on the hunt for good reviewers. These two reviews here both demonstrate exemplars of what makes an excellent academic book review.

The next item is a fine, sensitive, and evocative obituary of Professor Edward (Eddie) Webster, of the University of Witwatersrand who died on March 5. Peter Fairbrother reflects on the many examples of Webster as a grand scholar and a wonderful enthusiast for building knowledge and understanding of, and for, labour. Eddie had been a member of the *ELRR* Advisory Board for decades and always provided wise, encouraging, and helpful advice.

Finally, we include a Call for Papers for a Themed Collection to be published on FirstView, then in 35(3), in September 2025, entitled 'Green transition or social transformation? Socio-economic costs and challenges of energy transition for working people'. These are some of the biggest issues of our time, and guest editor Professor Piotr Żuk (piotr.zuk@helsinki.fi) has already identified some great quality papers but hopes for abstracts for more proposed articles before 30 September 2024. The link to all the *ELRR* Calls for Papers is https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/the-economic-and-labour-relations-review/announcements/call-for-papers.

All of us at *ELRR* hope we engage and provoke you in the wonderful issue. Good reading!

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