

Identity in Peer Review - TAA Town Hall Sept 21, 2021

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The Textbook and Academic Author Association participated in Peer Review Week 2021, an annual event led by academic publishers, institutions, societies, and researchers. This is a virtual community-led yearly global event that celebrates the essential role of peer review. Members from the Committee on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion prepared a short presentation to help facilitate a discussion on the role of identity in peer review regarding authoring and reviewing. Here we provide slides from the presentation, a synopsis of the discussions that took place, and some relevant resources for further reading.

DISCUSSION SYNOPSIS

After a brief introduction, we set up two break out rooms for discussion. One room discussed the role of identity in peer review from the reviewer/editor perspective and the other from the author perspective.

Reviewer/Editor perspective

Have you experienced bias as a reviewer or editor (of a textbook or journal)?

As a reviewer/editor, how do you ensure that your identity doesn't affect your review?

- Members responded that they consider themselves instinctively ethical and moral human beings and so this was an interesting question because it is not something that they think about. They wondered what would happen if they considered their identity as they conducted a review? There was a positive sense that it could be a good exercise to begin to think about how their own identity might affect their reviews.
- There was a discussion of the discipline-specific component to reviewing as how it relates to removing identity from authors being reviewed. Many disciplines are now using double-blind reviews which should eliminate much of the ability to infer the identity of the author. However, even with double-blind reviews we recognized that in smaller, more specialized areas within a discipline it may still be feasible to figure out which research group has submitted a paper which removes the anonymity of the authors. Anonymization of this type is not really feasible for editors. Editors often know the identities of submitting authors as well as the reviewers they might rely on. Given the lack of diversity in academic journal editorial panels, we noted that the problem of bias stemming from identity is likely to be perpetuated, and can only be improved if addressed intentionally.
- There was a thoughtful discussion about conservatism bias. Many noted that it is harder to get something published that does not conform to currently accepted knowledge (status quo) or is innovative. Such works are often held to a different (higher) standard such as needing more studies to verify validity. We didn't discuss situations in which this may be appropriate (or not) – possibly a topic for discussion in the future.
- Regarding controversial content that may not agree with the status quo, some noted that often reviewer concerns do not address the specifics of the research. Rather, the

reviewers may not have used an inclusive perspective. Many respondents felt it is appropriate to bring that to the table as a reviewer.

- One editor noted that she has experienced bias towards her reviewer comments when, for example, she reviews the work of senior males in the discipline. Young women professionals often get pushback from senior males about their suggestions.

Author perspective

Have you experienced bias as an author?

When you select a journal or request (textbook or journal) reviewers, what do you look for?

- Several people noted that they had experienced bias in several forms.
- There was a discussion of bias related to collaborations. Junior authors of color noted a reluctance of others to invite them to co-author work. This can be very discouraging when they are experts in their field and not invited to be a co-author. Another point discussed was when members reach out and ask colleagues to be co-authors and collaborate, they sometimes experience initial agreement that then slowly erodes as the collaborator drops out or makes excuses about why they could not move on with the project.
- There was a recommendation to use the TAA conference and membership as an excellent source to create collaborations and find reviewers through networking.
- It was noted that some journals allow authors to recommend reviewers for their submissions and that can be an opportunity to reduce reviewer bias. However, not all journals permit this, and many publishers will often also seek their own independent reviewers as well.
- One suggestion for finding reviewers was that when attending a session at a disciplinary conference by someone who could be a good reviewer for your work, that is a good time to do some networking.
- Another recommendation was to ask to see a sample review to assess what kinds of feedback and comments the reviewers provide. This is especially relevant for textbook reviewers and may not be feasible for journals.
- For textbook reviews, if you are working on a new book and reviewers do not share your vision of the book, sometimes you can get confirmation bias creeping in. One recommendation was for the author to “review your reviewers”. You can make suggestions to your editor about who is/is not reviewing the book well.
- When selecting a journal – look for expertise in the discipline, and familiarize yourself with the journal’s submission policies. You might even ask to interview the editors or reviewers to get a feel for how they approach their peer reviewing process.

Ideas Generated for Finding Reviewers for your work:

- Network at disciplinary conferences and through TAA to identify colleagues who might be reviewers or collaborators.
- Recommend your own reviewers to the editor of a journal, when possible.
- For textbook reviews - review your reviewers to alert the editors if you perceive confirmation bias or other issues with fair, thorough and consistent reviewing of your submission.

- Consider prospectively interviewing the editor and/or some reviewers of a journal to which you are considering submitting an article. The purpose of the interview would be to get a sense of a) the types of comments they would provide and b) if they share your vision of the discipline.

FURTHER RESOURCES on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Peer Review

From the Scholarly Kitchen: Eight ways to tackle diversity and inclusion in Peer Review

<https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2018/09/13/eight-ways-to-tackle-diversity-and-inclusion-in-peer-review/>

From SAGE Publishers: Guidelines for Reviewers and Authors

Some steps editors can take to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within their journals <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/taking-action-on-diversity>

From Nature Journals: Commitment to Diverse Peer reviewing

<https://www.nature.com/nature-portfolio/about/diversity-commitment>

From the CDC and “Preventing Chronic Disease”: Commitment to DEI in Peer Review.

https://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2021/21_0269.htm

From NIH Center for Scientific Review: Steps to Train Reviewers

reviewers. <https://nexus.od.nih.gov/all/2021/03/08/csrs-commitment-to-advancing-equity-diversity-and-inclusion-in-peer-review/>

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