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Biddix: A Glimpse Behind the Curtain: An Editor's Reflexivity
A GLIMPSE BEHIND THE CURTAIN: AN EDITOR'S REFLEXIVITY

PATRICK BIDDIX, ORACLE EDITOR

Reflexivity is not a concept editors write about often. We ask our qualitative researchers to be aware of the influences they have on the research process but fail at contemplating our own influence as editors publically. Admittedly, my perspectives, preferences, and decisions—no matter how well grounded in training, theory, and practice—affect what Oracle publishes. The extent of this effect, like the influence itself, varies with each manuscript I read or edit. Two of the articles in this issue deviate from the customary five-section format we see in academic journals. The process of consciously working to understand my editorial perspective and not imposing my mechanic and stylistic preferences on the pieces led me to reflect on my role as an editor. The result is a departure from the standard journal editorial, but one I believe has broader implications for both consumers and producers of published research.

Academic writing, like any form of communication, shares language elements of mechanics and style. Both teaching and editing academic writing influences these aspects of publication. I often reflect on how my writing and editing style shapes the development of my students' prose. As one of the final round editors of an academic journal, my style, along with the peer reviewers, associate editors, and copyeditors, is also reflected in the articles we publish. I have come to the conclusion that editing is a constructivist practice. When an editor suggests (or requests) clarification, a different word choice, organizational changes or other revisions, the original mechanics and style of an article can change—sometimes quite drastically. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but I think one worth exploring.

Mechanics suggests form and function—the process and organization of writing. The most influential perspective I've heard on the mechanics of academic writing was during a panel of well-published higher education authors who spoke at a workshop I attended several years ago. When asked how to plan for an article, one of the panelists surgically dissected the five traditional sections of a study. Her basic advice was, after determining a word limit (often dictated by journal policy), distribute the planned text of an article into three parts. One-third should be devoted to the introduction, review of literature, and method combined, one-third to results, and one-third to discussion. While methodology and topic can shift these estimates, I have found this formula invaluable. It answers the “how do I start this paper” question simply—X journal limits to 5,000 words, so I need roughly 1,600 words per part. If I am using a qualitative methodology, I know I need more time for results, so I will shift another section appropriately. If the literature on my topic is rich, I know I need to truncate or blend my introduction and leave more room for relating my findings to the previous research in my discussion.

Without question, this approach affects my editing style. When I receive a new submission or begin copyediting a manuscript after our peer reviewers have completed their work, among the first things I do is to visually “size up” the text to understand the balance of each section. If the review section is heavier than the discussion, I am more likely to focus my comments on the latter. I do this largely subconsciously and realize at times that I am attempting to impose my style on the manuscript. As a result, in the case of a manuscript that requires more heavy editing or a more critical review, I

frequently read the same manuscript twice and compare my results—the first time looking for how the word devotion fits the importance the author suggests (e.g., only 500 words for discussion, but 2,000 for literature, how?), the second time for content. I recognize this preference has implications for what we ultimately print, so I am grateful for having two associate editors who have the final read to ensure my mechanical preferences (or other biases recognized or not) are not so influential.

Style is much more subjective for me. My approach to teaching my graduate students how to find their academic voice is admittedly simplistic: If it is interesting to you, it is too casual. Academic writing is not a conversation; it is much more like a lecture. Monotonous, repetitive, or even boring is more customary. This description arose accidentally for me one day. I spent some time as a journalism major and edited my undergraduate institution's campus newspaper. Sports pages notwithstanding, Associated Press style is succinct. While clichés and idiomatic expressions occasionally find their way into print, there is often only room for the essentials in a column. What AP writing taught me is to find a middle ground between formal and casual. The challenge for adopting the prose we most often see in academic journals and keeping your own style is to be informative (i.e., somewhat dry) while finding a way to be engaging (but not conversational).

When I see it, I tend to treat conversational writing with the same red ink and calls for “word choice” that I do jargon-laden prose. Admittedly, I see much more of the former. My prevalent in-text comment is that casual writing “weakens your argument.” Certainly, there are those who would contend my perspective on style—arguing that it is not an editor's job to change the tone of a manuscript. I agree and am cognizant that my preference is the not the one and only true way to write for academic publication (hence, invoking my inner constructivist). I am consciously aware of this bias, which is another reason I read and edit a manuscript multiple times to ensure that my style is not improperly affecting a manuscript. That said, I feel I have a responsibility to help elevate the scholarly discourse on fraternity/sorority involvement. To ensure our articles contribute to the larger body of research, I favor a more formal prose style.

In this short reflection on my role, I have attempted to demonstrate that reflexivity is an important aspect of all components of inquiry. I believe it has a powerful role in the process of refining and ultimately publishing research. The mechanics and style of academic writing are both learned and shaped by experience. As our valuable work in the field or classroom is related to research and captured by the writing and publishing process, I think it is important to consider how our preferences, far beyond content, can affect how that work is communicated. In my two years as editor and six as a faculty member, I have come to recognize some aspects of the influence I may have on how scholarship is communicated. I discussed mechanics and style, but as easily could have written about the articles we accept, layout, or even distribute. I urge you, as writers, editors, and consumers of research, to consider your own reflexivity, or how the writing process affects and is affected by your role in communicating our understanding of fraternal involvement.