Peer review: an activity at the interface between teaching and research

The Fourth World Conference on Research Integrity was held in Rio de Janeiro last May. Discussions centered on the fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism triad and, thus, on the appropriate forms of retraction. Surrounding this theme core, there were numerous discussions with different perspectives, which raised questions such as what a journal's attitude should be upon suspicion of unethical procedures in a research study, the confirmation or denial of which may take a few years to be made. Additionally, how can educational and research institutions, acting alone and in conjunction with periodicals, foster an environment of greater ethical responsibility in scientific studies? What are the boundaries that allow one to claim there has been plagiarism or - a more delicate territory in the humanities - self-plagiarism? Many answers to these and many other questions are an area of knowledge directly linked with the concrete plan of doing and communicating science.

In this scenario, the production of scientific reviews is among the practices that can reinforce and qualify investigations and article production, promoting good conduct in research. A few questions hover over the consensus on the importance of issuing reviews: is preparing a review an educational or research activity? This was a question posed in one of the sessions of the congress. By and large those attending were of the opinion that they should be recognized as research. It is not uncommon in the daily life of a journal for reviewers to express difficulty in setting the limit of their interference in the text. In certain situations, reviews become mediators of the relationships between authors and reviewers, the latter positioning themselves, albeit occasionally, as advisors by establishing dense, comprehensive dialog with the text.

In practice, we recognize that a review can effectively contribute not only to qualifying the text it is made on, but also provide indications that are substantial enough to influence an author's understanding of the production, analysis, and presentation of scientific data, in addition to specific content on the object of the study, becoming a source of teaching that can later impact both the research and the text writing process. Of course, in order for a review to reach this level of contribution, an educational dimension is mobilized together with the expertise of research. This understanding follows our comprehension that this is an activity that is at the interface between the two areas.

This broader view raises other issues on attributing value to the review issuing activity, which gets little visibility in the academic world, although it is essential to support it (both with regard to project reviews for sponsoring agencies and for periodicals). This brings up another topic, which is how to

recognize and specifically enhance this work in a scenario where productivity is set as a line that guides scientific incentive policies.

Discussions and new ideas on the peer review process also come up in this territory. One of the most disturbing debates is over open peer review, one in which both author and reviewers are identified, breaking away from the traditional double blind approach. BMJ Group (British Medical Journal) journals that adopted the open system argue that this would be a way to give visibility and recognition to the task of peer reviews and to increase process transparency, since the parties involved are identified. Additionally, they point out other advantages noted in the practice, including the increased quality of the reviews and, going against an initial concern related to not influencing the manuscript approval rate.

Open reviews cause issues such as the weakening of the reviewer's impartiality with the removal of anonymity to resurface. Identified reviews certainly demand a less personalistic culture, so that this process does not become yet another element in the production of conflicts and disputes in a traditionally competitive environment. This could also work as a limiting factor for the participation of new researchers as reviewers, since authors who are more established in academia may find it more difficult to accept criticism.

A matter that rose no controversy was the purpose of supporting reviewers by promoting learning situations on the drafting of reviews. Alternatives such as offering classroom and online courses have been adopted by institutions and journals. The use of very specific review guidelines, similar to research checklists, is also being incorporated as a way to guide the reviewer. Periodicals already using this practice believe such devices help both authors while drafting the text and reviewers, who often alternate these two roles.

An innovative approach, which obviously would deserve broader discussion, for its potential to harm the privacy of the author under review, would be to provide online reviews on published texts for peer consultation. In this case, reviews selected by the editors would work as a benchmark for other reviewers, who, by consulting them, would be able to reflect on how researchers, when acting as reviewers, organize and express criticism on a text that has been submitted to a journal for review.

What stands out in this discussion is the whole idea of being able to positively affect the establishment of the scientific communication process. We understand that a researcher who at a given moment acts as an author, does not naturally and necessarily know how to act as a reviewer. Meanwhile, we note that researchers who master the facets of this activity find themselves overwhelmed by demands of this nature. It is therefore necessary to expand the universe of researchers encouraged to participate in

reviewing texts, without such participation being bureaucratic, rather expressing an implication in qualifying scientific texts. Advancing this perspective involves assuming that the drafting of reviews can also be addressed as an object of the teaching-learning relationship.

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