Toward Expert Publishing Practice

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Human Resource Development Review 2011 10: 119
DOI: 10.1177/1534484311400995

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Human Resource Development Review
10(2) 119–122

DOI: 10.1177/1534484311400995
http://hrd.sagepub.com

One of the many benefits of being editor of *Human Resource Development Review* has been working with reviewers and authors in developing and publishing quality scholarship. Too often, however, manuscripts arrive that have little chance for publication. In contrast, while certainly not perfect, other manuscripts plainly stand out as being eminently publishable. What are the key characteristics of manuscripts that warrant rejection as opposed to those that merit publication? Not surprisingly, rejected manuscripts are more likely to have been written by novice researchers, not because they are less talented, creative, or informed about a topic, but instead because the authors neglected some of the major tasks of preparing a manuscript for publication. To be clear, this is not to say that experts do not make such oversights, but they are much less likely to do so (Alexander, 2004).

Sternberg (2005) counsels scholars to attend to "what you say," "how you say it," "what to do with what you say," and "what to do with what others say" to increase the likelihood that their papers will be accepted by good journals. The first three areas pertain to preparing manuscripts for submission, and the fourth relates to responding to the reviewers' and editor's comments. Under the category of "what you say," the contribution that the paper makes to the field seems to be the most salient characteristic because this is what adds substance to your work. Sternberg suggests that shortcomings in this area are the number one reason articles are rejected. With respect to "what to do with what you say," journal fit is most relevant. Submitting an empirical article to a theoretical journal like *Human Resource Development Review* will always result in rejection. Simply checking the aim and scope of the journal will allow you to avoid such a setback. As for "how you say it," a failure to attend to your writing—with respect to both the substantive and the mechanical—is another major path to rejection. Reviewers and editors want to examine work that is readable, clear, concise, interesting, and not too technical for the reading audience. Finally, when dealing with "what to do with others say," remember that reviewers are not attacking you personally; they are trying their best to help you improve your work and to advance the field. Developing a thick skin is a prerequisite to publishing in the social sciences. Expert writers tend to deal effectively with each of the aforementioned issues; novices do not. This editorial examines these four facets of expert writing for publication—contribution to the field, journal fit, attention to writing, and handling what others say—with respect to HRD.

Expert-novice theory provides a valuable theoretical lens for examining academic publication. This theory provides insights into the practices of experts as opposed to novices as they solve problems (Alexander, 2004). Educational practice and learning in general can be informed by understanding what experts do to perform at high levels

and what novices do that makes them less successful at comparable tasks (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). The first generation of expert-novice studies (Holyoak, 1991) investigated expertise as the resourceful solution of generic problems in situations where content knowledge was presumed to be insignificant (i.e., the participant is given a problem to solve with few or no contextual cues). Second-generation studies demonstrated that general problem-solving strategies often failed to distinguish between experts and novices; these studies targeted tasks within particular problem-solving contexts (e.g., solving problems in physics or chess). In addition to speed, accuracy, and efficiency, which were found to be important in first-generation research, domain-specific knowledge became associated with expert performance. The upshot of this entire line of research is that experts put more time and effort into improving their performance in their domain (e.g., academic writing and publishing); possess a richer, more integrated base of domain-specific knowledge; organize this knowledge in a more integrated manner; do more planning and self-analysis; and employ strategies suitable for solving a problem at hand (e.g., getting published) as compared to novices (Alexander, 2004; Bransford et al., 1999).

In the case of academic writing and publishing, then, it is instructive to compare and contrast what experts, as opposed to novices, do and do not do. With respect to their contributions to the field, experts tend to make a compelling case for why their studies needed to be conducted in the first place, implicitly acknowledging that it may not be obvious to the reader (Kendall, Silk, & Chu, 2000). Second, experts put considerable effort into explaining how their work contributes to the field or moves the field forward. Experts note when they have answered a call for research in the field or related fields. They also discuss the scientific merit of their work by highlighting the implications their findings have for theory, research, and practice, being careful not to shortchange any one of these vital areas at the expense of the others. However, novices sometimes neglect to make a compelling case for their research or put insufficient effort into clearly delineating the implications of their work or how it contributes meaningfully to the field. At *Human Resource Development Review*, most often I see novices missing opportunities to show how their work might improve HRD practice, followed closely by the lack of effort in recommending specific additional research. Both, of course, are vital to advancing the field. For some reviewers and editors, failing to address the implications of one's work with respect to improving theory, research, *and* practice is tantamount to sloppy scholarship and lessens the possibility of publication.

Expert authors also are more likely to "do their homework" before submitting their work to a journal. In other words, experts more often study the journal's aim and scope to see if it is a good fit for their research. This involves checking the alignment of their work with an editor's published vision for the journal. Experts also seem more inclined to write with an audience in mind, understanding that not only should their paper be written for a certain audience, but that it should also be accessible to readers who have less expertise or interest in the area (Sternberg, 2005). Furthermore, expert authors write with the journal's style and word limits in mind. For the most part, novice authors are much more likely to miss that *Human Resource Development Review* is a theoretical

and conceptual journal, not an empirical one, and neglect to see that the journal's audience is comprised of HRD scholars and practitioners, not a more generic human resource audience per se. Novices are more likely to miss these important distinctions.

After carefully acknowledging the possible contributions of your work to moving the field forward and ensuring journal fit, the mundane, but vital, task of writing well must be addressed (Sternberg, 2005). This is the "nuts and bolts" of the paper. Expert authors understand how important it is to put considerable effort in putting their best foot forward when submitting a manuscript. They define constructs very early in the manuscript, make clear conceptual links between variables, present complex ideas unambiguously in figures, and provide the reader with organizational "guideposts" to assist their reading and comprehension. They also check their references for accuracy and ensure that their citations and references are formatted according to the style of the journal. Novice authors are more often less precise with their references, and their definitions tend to be lost in the middle of the manuscript. They thus inadvertently fail to present their work in the best light. Unfortunately for aspiring authors, reviewers and editors do not overlook these shortcomings.

Finally, we must take heed of what reviewers and editors tell us, without taking offense. We must remember that reviewers and editors will invariably make requests for clarification, recommendations for improvement, and more if you are fortunate enough to get an offer to revise and resubmit. Indubitably, these recommendations (remember, they are not commandments—there can be some wiggle room with editors) can sting, and too often novices miss the point that experts in the field are trying to help them present their work more skillfully (Sternberg, 2005) and for no charge whatsoever. I have seen too many less experienced authors simply give up at this critical point, believing their work was deemed unworthy of publication. We must learn to shake off perceived rejection of our creative work and move to improve it meaningfully by addressing the recommendations, no matter how voluminous they may seem. This is how we improve our scholarship and learn from our mistakes. Moreover, even rejected manuscripts can be improved decidedly by following reviewer recommendations before submitting the manuscript elsewhere. Publishing is a learning process fraught with risk taking (e.g., taking chances, opening oneself to criticism; Reio, 2007); those who play it too safe never send their work off for scholarly review—or publish it (Sternberg, 2005). Experts appreciate that risks must be taken to produce their best work; to my knowledge, there are no shortcuts.

As social scientists, reviewers and editors necessarily take a skeptical, but prudent, look at a wide range of issues when evaluating the scholarly merit of a manuscript; borrowing from Sternberg (2005), I present but four. As an editor, I always am seeking solid scholarship that advances the field of HRD. I hope that both novice and expert scholars find my comments toward improving the likelihood of publication helpful toward meeting that end.

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