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Ser pesquisador, ser editor, ser autor

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Being a researcher, being an editor, being an author

With me, it happened in the beginning of the last decade (1990). When the post of editor of the unit's periodical became vacant, the Director, like most Directors, looked around him in search of his best friend or his worst enemy. He picked me for one of those two reasons, which one of them I have not found out. But it really does not make that much of a difference given the size of the problem and the responsibility involved.

What changes when a researcher becomes an editor? Or better yet, does anything change? The answer is yes, something does change, and that change is for the much better: the editor learns to "de-contextualize", to distinguish good scientific practice from the specialty he is dedicated to.

I explain: within a certain area, the researcher's scientific procedure makes a whole, a single body, integrated with the area itself. The good practices of both research and science are learned together, and they end up being undistinguishable. The first one is almost automatic, it works in a nearly unconscious manner. It is developed with the necessary rigorousness, but remains in the background.

Even when giving his/her opinion about an article, or taking part in the examining board of a Master's Degree or a Ph.D., the researcher is more concerned with the scientific aspect than with the methodological aspect. Or when commenting on the latter, he/she does it in a somewhat imprecise, vague way – but which, curiously, is pertinent in more than 99% of the cases. Regarding this, we teach our graduate students:

authors always think their text is perfect, but that is almost never true. Sometimes it is difficult for them to even understand why the evaluator earmarked or commented a certain idea, a given stretch or a particular construction. The recommendation, however, is: never discard thoughtlessly an observation made by an evaluator; perhaps he/she may have not totally grasped the idea in that particular point, but he/she felt there's something strange there. A review is thus almost certainly necessary.

What changes when you become an editor? You begin to see the methodology, the argumentation, the exposition, the selection and the way the ideas fit together as separate from the scientific content proper. Yes, an article is an integration of procedure, content and presentation, but science is transmitted efficiently only when those three elements are present and linked together in a balanced way. The editor develops the ability of seeing them and analyzing them separately, but without losing the indispensable perception of the well-balanced whole they should form.

The way I discovered that was as surprising as it was for me to become an editor. I was invited by another graduate program to coordinate the students' seminars, which had been structured as a formal discipline (this experience is described in Trzesniak 2004). It was part of my duties to comment on and give suggestions to the students' projects. After a while, the advisors commented that the students asked how is it possible for a physicist to know so much about production engineering? They were only partially correct. I wasn't exactly a physicist who knew about production engineering, but rather an editor who knew (i) how to develop a research of good quality and (ii) the way to report it efficiently (which requires scientific writing as well as editing).

Engineering is really not that distant from my area. So maybe the theory I just enunciated was not valid after all. But I began to teach editing courses throughout Brazil, discovered the admirable librarians and was able to exchange knowledge with them in a common ground, sometimes with a little adjustment in the language. The theory was corroborated!

The next area I interacted with was nursing, when I was invited to teach a course at the Coben, in Salvador. Here's another group I admire very much. With them, I learned quickly to care. But I also learned to exchange, for my intellectual growth and to science's benefit. I discovered other areas: psychology, phonoaudiology, surgery, education,... always making an effort to take and to bring from one to the other the best and the most efficient in scientific methodology and communication.

So what's all this talk about? Actually I write all this in order to convince you, nurse, to accept that a presumptuous physicist give you advice on scientific articles. Although, as an attenuating factor, it is an editor physicist – at this point much more of an editor than a physicist.

I believe that the time I have worked with the REEUSP staff has already given me the possibility of identifying a few aspects that may be capable of improving the scientific literature in nursing, especially (i) regarding the submission of texts that are “readier” for publication (thus reducing the time for editing); (ii) regarding the presentation of the content in an interesting way for the reader, which will result in good evaluations by indexers and fostering organs.

Thus here are a few topics for each author – and it is because of them that the title mentions being an author – to consider, analyze, think about and, if he/she judges them worthwhile, adopt:

1) What’s the main audience of your article?

The options are: researchers, university professors, undergraduate and graduate students, working professionals, specialists from other areas and the public in general.

2) Which is (or are) the innovative characteristic(s) of your article?

Does it deal with an original idea; does it deal in an original way with a known problem; does it present a theoretical aspect in a way that will make possible/easier to employ it in the professional practice; does it present a theory or an application in a better way than usually employed?

3) What will the reader have broadened after reading your article?

His/her level of information in the area; his/her formation as a specialist in the area; his/her formation as a researcher in general; his/her didactic capacity; his/her choice of alternatives of action in face of the practical problem presented?

4) How may other researches benefit from the article’s content?

In other words, evaluate concretely the article’s potential to be used as reference in future researches.