

Editorial Introduction:

“We regret to inform you that...”: Academia and the power of rejection improvement

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Working in academia is a lot like being a 14-year old girl: your sense of self hinges mostly on others' acceptance of you, or in our case, your work. While academics may not be that concerned about wearing the right brand of shoes or hanging out with the cool kids, we do agonize as feverishly about our work getting accepted by the 'right' journals. And just like the cool kids in middle school, the 'right' journals are the ones least likely to like you, or more accurately, accept your work. In fact, when you look at the top journals in the field of communication, their ranking appears to correlate directly with their rejection rate. Rejection in academia is so commonplace that slews of articles have been written about it, soothing academics about the normalcy of rejection or providing advice about what to do when that article you worked on so hard was rejected (again).

The question that goes unanswered, however, is whether this high rate of rejection is truly helpful when it comes to furthering research. Sometimes articles do really deserve to get rejected. Anyone who has served as a reviewer can tell you stories about one, or maybe two, articles that went nowhere really fast – or, often, very slowly. But sometimes, the rejection is questionable. We've all heard about, and have most likely had personal experience with articles rejected over reasons that are outright trivial or even political. Whenever researchers decide to put a research project to bed after it has been rejected too many times, should we all be relieved that a horrible piece of research is finally out of sight, or did we just miss an opportunity to learn from a truly innovative scholar? Quite frankly, we'll never know, and in some ways, that's a shame. One can only guess how many Newtonian laws get tucked away into a bottom drawer by discouraged researchers. And just as likely, we'll never know how many researchers are simply damaged and discouraged, personally and in their careers, by casual rejection slips.

What makes this entire battle with rejection even more interesting is that when it comes to that other side of the academic coin, teaching, it's all about improvement. We

can't reject students or their work, no matter how tempted we may be at times. Instead, we provide them with constructive feedback, and allow them to learn and grow. In the US, institutions are increasingly rated on their retention and graduation rates, meaning that faculty members will do everything possible to help students improve to passing. At my institution, for instance, we offer student mentors, peer tutors, roundtable writing sessions, writing lab assistance, research assistance, workshops, and if I were to open up my email right now, I'm sure I could tell you about another ten things we do just help our students become better scholars. Yet when we, those same people who were all about improving a minute ago, are asked to review an article for publication, that entire 'work harder, get better' attitude goes out the window and suddenly we write things like, 'This article needs too much work, I recommend rejection'.

Why this shift? Why are we as teachers so much more accepting about budding scholars needing room to grow, while as researchers we assume everyone should know exactly what they are doing, the first time around? If an academic field is to grow, that should technically include the growth of the researchers in that field as well. If projects that show promise but are in need of work are rejected, will a field truly grow? Or will it simply stagnate around accepted concepts and theories?

At *Participations*, we get asked about rejection rate every once in a while. Some institutions will only accept work from journals with a certain (read: high) rejection rate for promotion and evaluation purposes, under the assumption that the higher the rejection rate, the better your accepted piece must have been. However, at *Participations*, we don't really track our rejection rate as feverishly as other journals do. So whenever we get a request for our rejection rate, we turn to our esteemed editor who makes some calculations and then responds with an email that usually reads something like this: 'I would say our acceptance rate is somewhere around 65-70%. I think it's safe to say we're more about improving promising articles than outright rejection.'

By traditional standards, rates like that make *Participations* a less competitive journal, one with supposedly less impact than some of the similar journals out there. And yet, when my co-author and I were writing our articles on spoilers and enjoyment, one of the only articles on spoilers and enjoyment that we could find had been published in *Participations*. And when one wants to find publications on transcultural fandom, *Participations* is the first hit on any search engine. So while the email may not be what the scholar has been taught to expect or desire, this focus on improvement as opposed to rejection does not necessarily mean that publishing in *Participations* renders one's article less relevant or worthy.

In fact, as we all know, revising your article is possibly even harder than writing the piece in the first place. You have to balance your goals and ideas with those of your reviewers, explain yourself in much more detail than you ever thought possible, and heaven forbid if you and your reviewer have a theoretical disagreement. It is usually the revision process where the interesting dialogue takes place – the kind that really helps both the writer and the reviewer grow. We argue, we explain, we do additional research, we cajole,

and all of that work makes both parties gain a deeper understanding of the topic at hand. This kind of dialogue is what helps push the field forward, one that we as scholars should try to have as often as possible, and one that is silenced every time a manuscript gets rejected outright.

Participations unapologetically sets itself apart from many other journals in this process by actively encouraging this dialogue in two distinct ways: a more involved revision process and a policy of open refereeing. The latter means that reviewers no longer have the cloak of anonymity to hide behind, and without that cloak, it becomes a lot less attractive to issue the brusque dismissals of other people's work that reviews so often include. We believe that including reviewers' names not only leads to increased serious consideration of someone's work as well as civility, we also argue that this process is much more likely to advance knowledge, understanding, and even collegiality between researchers.

We are of course not arguing that all submissions should get a chance at revision. Obviously, sometimes pieces are simply not suitable for publication yet. But why not take the attitude that everything can be improved upon from the teaching side of academics and apply it to our scholarship as well? Offer more 'revise and resubmit', and fewer 'rejections'. Sure, it will entail more work and effort for all parties involved, but the resulting dialogue will surely only benefit academia. So let's pick up our red pens, step out from behind the mask of 'reviewer 1' and 'reviewer 2' and really start talking to one another.