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## Making Publishing Less Painful: Shifting to a Relational Peer-Review Process

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# Making Publishing Less Painful: Shifting to a Relational Peer-Review Process

by Sajni Lacey, Kristina Clement, Lalitha Nataraj, and Nicole Pagowsky

## Abstract

Navigating confusing peer-review structures in publishing can be daunting for librarians at all stages of their careers. In this paper, the authors will differentiate peer-review models and reflect on their experiences with these formats in the context of the September 2022 special issue of *College & Research Libraries*. Additional discussion will include the hidden curriculum of professional norms in academia; areas for growth in peer review related to diversity, equity, and inclusion; and peer review as an individual and collective form of professional development that shapes how we engage with scholarship in LIS.

## Keywords

Academic libraries, peer-review, publishing, open peer-review, community of practice

## Biographies

Sajni Lacey is the Learning & Curriculum Support Librarian at the University of British Columbia's Okanagan campus. She is currently working on an MA in Education. Her writing focuses on racial imposter syndrome, information literacy, and curriculum.

Kristina Clement is the Student Outreach and Sponsored Programs Librarian at Kennesaw State University Georgia. Her research focuses on equitable outreach, middle management, and the faux-equity of the one-shot instruction session. She is also working on a Doctorate in Higher Education Leadership and Practice from the University of North Georgia.

Lalitha Nataraj is the Social Sciences Librarian at Cal State University San Marcos. Her research focuses on critical information literacy, relational-cultural theory, and bureaucratic practices in academic libraries.

Nicole Pagowsky is Curriculum & Pedagogy Librarian at the University of Arizona. She is also a current PhD student and iSchool adjunct faculty. Nicole is 2023-24 Chair of the ACRL Instruction Section. Her research focuses on information literacy programs, critical teaching practices, and perceptions of librarian labor. Learn more: [nicolepagowsky.com](http://nicolepagowsky.com).

## Introduction

The process of peer review is considered an essential aspect of the creation and dissemination of scholarship within academia. As many might agree, the peer-review process can feel overwhelming, especially for early career librarians, because of processes that appear secretive, bureaucratic, competitive, and critical. We often do not learn how to navigate publishing as an author or reviewer as we work toward tenure, promotion, or other equivalencies. Additionally, peer-review processes are framed as neutral and objective when they cannot possibly be neutral and objective, and in effect, further marginalize historically excluded groups. The special issue of *College & Research Libraries [C&RL]* published in September 2022 was intentionally structured to provide authors with a way to disrupt this approach to scholarship. Authors and peer reviewers were given the choice of engaging in traditional double-cloaked review, or open developmental review. Developmental review is not commonly used, even less so as a choice between review formats. The framing of the availability of choice “of peer-review for this issue was collaboration and mentoring, to use discussion to engage with articles rather than solely critique” (Pagowsky, 2022, p. 721). This project was intended to be co-constructed and generative. The following discussion will provide further insight into how authors, reviewers, and the editor engaged with this approach, and the personal and professional impacts it had. A deeper dive into the process of both developmental/open peer-review and the more traditional peer-review process opted for by authors will be explored.

## Traditional Peer Review

The traditional peer-review process is defined as a single-cloaked (reviewers are anonymous, but authors are not) or double-cloaked (reviewers and authors both maintain their anonymity) review intended to mitigate bias while assessing the quality and validity of articles to deem them suitable for publication. Online environments have democratized the expression of ideas, research, and opinions, and made it easier to reach “the audience without any external evaluation, quality control, or critical review,” making traditional peer review even more valued because it is used to legitimate and “triage research-based output in the sea of information” (Dali & Jaeger, 2018, p. 102). The field of library and information science (LIS) reveres peer review not only in the publication process, but also in job performance evaluation (Dali & Jaeger, 2018, p. 103). For those of us who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), peer-review can be construed as part of the hidden curriculum of professional norms in academia; it’s a mystifying undertaking intended to validate our work and our own sense of belonging within a profession that is primarily white.

Instruction librarians balance teaching students the merits of peer-reviewed scholarship while implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) acknowledging our own complicity in replicating the problematic and exclusionary practices rampant in

scholarly publishing. The positivist structure of traditional peer review—framed as objective—purposefully cloaks the researcher’s positionality to avoid bias and facilitates a power dynamic that allows for unfettered criticism, which can often feel confusing or even cruel, rather than constructive (Roh, 2022). Peer-reviewed publishing is deeply entrenched in academic bureaucracy; it is a primary requirement of the tenure and promotion process, which is itself a confounding, meritocratic gauntlet navigated by all faculty. Traditional peer review purports to be neutral and impersonal in its cloaking practices, but is, in actuality, rife with racial disparities (Strauss et al., 2023). Traditional peer review, for example, “suppress[es] and censor[s] voices that illuminate [issues of race and racism] . . . [and] keep[s] research about people of colour from being published. So, whilst the outcomes are clear (racial disparities), the processes are often elusive” (Strauss et al., 2023. p. 3). Those of us writing about race and racism are often asked during traditional peer review why our research is even necessary, which Strauss et al. note is a type of epistemic exclusion, because it implies that inquiry focused on race and racism is niche or unworthy of broader scholarly attention (p. 2). Roh observes that peer-review largely relies on unpaid labor which influences *who* is able to contribute their expertise as a reviewer; those who can afford to give their time freely also have power to determine what does or does not get published (2022).

For those writing about vulnerable topics, the lack of established trust between author and reviewer makes it a formidable task to challenge commentary. So, authors may overly compromise or capitulate to reviewers’ demands in order to get published.

### Developmental Peer Review

Developmental—or open—peer review, for the purposes of the *C&RL* special issue, was defined as peer review that is not cloaked and where authors and reviewers know each other's identities. In addition to knowing the identities of all involved, the reviewers were able to communicate with each other in addition to communicating with the authors and the guest editor. The developmental peer review featured multiple review periods that included editor check-ins with both authors and reviewers, opportunities for authors and reviewers to converse using the comment feature in Google Docs, and editor feedback for both authors and editors. Those who chose to engage in developmental review—either as authors or as reviewers—shared a mindset and agreement for mentoring and supporting each other as much as possible.

There were benefits and drawbacks to the developmental peer review for the *C&RL* special issue. The first and foremost benefit was that the developmental peer review worked to actively build trust among authors, reviewers, and editor, something that is often missing from traditional publishing and closed peer-review models. The trust that grew among all parties not only resulted in the cocreation of high-quality final papers for the special issue, but also created a community in which thoughtful

questioning and direct challenging became normal and accepted practice among reviewers, authors, and editor. Building this brave space was not without risk; the editor acknowledged that there could be instances when a person with less power or status would feel uncomfortable providing negative feedback to a person holding more power. The acknowledgement of this potential power imbalance meant that the editor had to invest significantly more time into managing the ongoing feedback and conversations between authors and reviewers throughout the developmental review, while also providing her own peer review for each article. The extra time investment for the editor could be considered a disadvantage to the developmental peer-review model, but, given the outcome of the *C&RL* special issue as one of the most successful issues of the journal in recent history,<sup>1</sup> it was worth enduring. It should also be noted that a significant drawback to developmental peer review, from an editorial perspective, is that it can be much more difficult to reject an article once the review is complete. The more personal and relational nature of the developmental peer review used for the *C&RL* special issue puts a fair amount of pressure on the editor to accept manuscripts because of the time invested and the relationships developed by the authors, reviewers, and editor. Therefore, editors who choose to use developmental peer review should consider creating advance agreements and workflow plans for stronger decision-making about submissions that do not progress substantially toward a polished draft, do not stay on track for timely completion, or reach an impasse regarding revision decisions.

### Why Both Peer-Review Styles Were Used

Inclusivity was at the heart of format and process decisions for this special issue. Authors and reviewers have different working styles that best complement their research and writing approaches. Offering both traditional and developmental review was a way to be supportive of this variety while acknowledging the limitations placed on our scholarship by differing power dynamics in these peer-review structures. Care was taken to match reviewers appropriately to authors, based not only on expertise but also on shared identity across intersections. For one instance of traditional review, a peer reviewer added follow-up comments to the editor's attention with notes on how to frame the suggestions without potentially revealing their identity, as the reviewer had guessed who the authors were and did not want to be viewed negatively for sending criticism. The reviewer preferred traditional review because they could hide their identity, especially while in a precarious position in their career. In another instance, a BIPOC author requested developmental review with BIPOC reviewers in order to feel solidarity and have open, ongoing conversations about heavy content that could not be adequately dealt with in one or two discrete commenting sessions and the anonymous identity of traditional review. In both cases, as well as other, related circumstances, offering

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<sup>1</sup> According to the journal, in the first month after the issue was released, it received more than twice as many views as a typical issue's average, at over 36k.

different models allowed for varying approaches toward feelings of safety, deeper discussion, and co-construction of ideas.

## Author's Perspectives

Kristina Clement<sup>2</sup>

This was my first experience with open or developmental peer review. I don't recall exactly if the original call for proposals mentioned that there would be developmental review, and, if so, I probably didn't really know what that meant. But, once my coauthor, Zoe Bastone, and I received our proposal acceptance, we got more information about the types of review and we were kind of excited about the developmental option. We still didn't know what to expect, but both of us had gone through cloaked peer review before and neither of us were thrilled with the outcomes, even though it had resulted in published works for both of us. So, we figured, why not try something new? I'm really glad we did, because it has been the single best experience with peer review that I've ever been through and I hope I will have the opportunity to experience something like this again in the future.

I am a peer reviewer for a number of journals and currently they all use double-cloaked reviews. None of the journals for which I peer review provide structured training on how to peer review outside of a short "best practices" handout or a yearly reminder to be civil and constructive. They just let you sign up, list your self-proclaimed areas of expertise, and send you requests for peer review. I do not like blind peer reviews, but I do them to help people become better writers and contributors to our field. Because I want my reviews to do good and not harm, I have put in the work to become a good reviewer. I put a lot of time and effort into my reviews, reading the papers multiple times, and hoping that the author or authors understand that my criticisms are meant to be constructive and not critical for the sake of being critical, regardless of my final recommendation. But I have no way of knowing how my reviews are taken and what feels clear and constructive to me may not to the author whose work I am reviewing. I'm sure that I come across as the dreaded "Reviewer 2" sometimes because when someone is critical of your work, even if the criticism is constructive and you've taken the time to put care into it, it can be very hard to look past the critique. The ability to ask a reviewer for clarification on their comments or suggestions is a great way to develop quality scholarship, and we got to do that with this special issue of *C&RL*.

It was amazing to have a space to share thoughts back and forth with our reviewers and our editor. The reviewers were very thoughtful with their comments, and it was like collaborating on a project together—totally unlike the peer reviews that I've received and the ones that I've written. Our paper went from something we thought

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<sup>2</sup> Bastone, Z., & Clement, K. (2022). Serving Everyone or Serving No One? Examining the Faux-Equity of the One-Shot. *special issue of C&RL*, edited by Nicole Pagowsky, 83(5), 780-794. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.83.5.780>

was just okay to something that was much deeper and more meaningful, and I think it's the best thing I've ever written because of this process. My coauthor and I were then—and are still—believers in practicing vulnerability both personally and professionally, and developmental review seemed to be a natural fit. Conversing directly with your reviewers is a vulnerable act on all sides and there was definitely some anxiety around what kind of interactions we would have with our reviewers and editor. Additionally, my coauthor and I both were feeling shades of imposter syndrome over being included in this special issue. I won't lie—it was very intimidating at first to be included in this project with so many LIS scholars and practitioners whom I greatly respect, the special issue editor included. Developmental peer review helped lift the veil of imposter syndrome for us and showed my coauthor and me that we were indeed worthy to be sharing our ideas and research in this project—and that producing something great is very rarely a solo task.

Going through developmental peer review had impacts for me beyond the special issue. Around the same time that the *C&RL* special issue call for proposals came out, I was working on cofounding a new scholarly journal about open educational resources in higher ed. Going through this developmental review inspired us to commit to open peer review for our journal, even though our current platform presents some constraints. We aspire to integrate more elements of author-reviewer conversation into our open review process so that others can have an experience like I did with developmental peer review.

Sajni Lacey<sup>3</sup>

At the time of submitting my proposal for the *C&RL* special issue, I was a novice at both writing professional scholarship and reviewing it. I had written a few pieces before, both alone and collaboratively, but they had not been part of a fully cloaked peer-review process. I had submitted to peer-reviewed journals before and had not been successful. Based on this history, primarily because of the feedback, I was demoralized about submitting anything at all. I had found the reviewer feedback to be critical to the point where I was starting to feel negative about the writing process as a whole. I was feeling averse to submitting anything to peer-reviewed sections of journals, even when I had been encouraged to resubmit. As I have reflected on these experiences, part of the problem stemmed from my time in library school, and in the early stages of my career. I had not been given any training professionally or in library school on how to go through the process of writing and submitting for publication, but it was expected of me in my roles within academic libraries.

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<sup>3</sup> Lacey, S. (2022). Racial Imposter Syndrome, White Presenting, and Burnout in the One-Shot Classroom. *special issue of C&RL*, edited by Nicole Pagowsky, 83(5), 841-843. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.83.5.841>

When I saw the call for this special issue, I was drawn to submitting for a couple of reasons despite my previous experiences. While I had been thinking about the topic of racial imposter syndrome as part of my teaching practice for a while, I was intrigued with Nicole’s writing in the call for proposals, and her work as a whole. I was a fan of her work and excited to see something written and led by her. I had followed her work around information literacy and instruction and thought this would be an empathetic place to explore this topic.

When my piece was accepted, I was excited and nervous. While I had thought a lot about the idea of racial imposter syndrome in the library classroom, I had not really thought about what it would be like to actually write on the topic. Throughout the writing process, it was incredibly personal and difficult to put into words what I had been thinking. I felt uncomfortably visible in the drafting process and did not feel that I had the professional credibility to publish in something so visible. Fortunately, I had been matched with another person who self-identifies as bi or mixed-race. This relationship was quite transformative for me, as the comments made on my piece not only improved it but were validating for me as a librarian and as a person. The reviewer drew attention to several key areas such as how I spoke about my own identity, clarifying the examples I used, and reducing repetition that made my piece stronger, and was kind, generous, and thoughtful with their feedback and support. While it may seem obvious, for me to receive this feedback when I knew it was coming from a place of understanding and lived experience, it encouraged me, made me reflect on my work, and deepen its connection to the literature. Moving forward, this work has been very supportive of my own growth as a writer and as a reviewer.

Lalitha Nataraj<sup>4</sup>

I had experienced both traditional and open peer review prior to submitting my proposal for the special issue and while both experiences were highly positive, I preferred the latter. Traditional review often feels like a one-sided conversation: there is the prolonged period while we wait for the feedback, and when it finally arrives, we must grapple with how to address faceless critiques (or risk not getting published). The piece I cowrote with April Ibarra Siqueiros (2022) incorporated autoethnography, which, to a large extent, requires vulnerability on the part of the researcher(s). Our research was grounded in challenging what Quiñonez et al. refer to as “dominant ideologies of neutrality and objectivity as they are valorized in information literacy pedagogy” (2021, p. 242). Traditional, double-cloaked peer-review itself is intended to protect the reviewer and the reviewed, allowing for unimpeded critique without bias. But this way of doing things obscures empathy in the process—how do you appropriately review work that is incredibly subjective if

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<sup>4</sup> Nataraj, L., & Ibarra Siqueiros, A. (2022). “Slow Your Roll”: Making Time for Reflection and Diverse Epistemic Practices in Library Instruction. *special issue of C&RL*, edited by Nicole Pagowsky, 83(5), 819-832. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.83.5.819>



you're required to separate the research from the researcher? One tenet of Critical Race Theory—a vital framework in my own scholarship—is the use of counterstories to challenge majoritarian narratives; anonymizing these tools (i.e. redacting our names and identities) removes their meaning.

Developmental review felt like a more collaborative, dialogic approach with a constant back-and-forth that facilitated inquiry—when the reviewers asked for clarification, we could explain our reasoning (which helped refine our writing). The community-oriented approach to reviewing and writing made me feel that we were contributing something meaningful to LIS scholarship. Our piece mentioned epistemic injustice and one of the reviewers was an Indigenous Studies librarian who made substantial suggestions for framing and also provided critical material for us to cite in the work. The tone of the critiques was empathetic and supportive—I and my coauthor remarked on how it felt like the reviewers wanted to see us succeed and have our work published. For Nicole to have coordinated such an intentional match made us feel understood as scholars. Here we would have the opportunity to have someone with the appropriate expertise review our work and whose feedback would help us convey our ideas in a sensitive and respectful manner. And this benefit went both ways—I hope the reviewers felt equally valued for being matched to pieces that were in conversation with their own research.

Nicole Pagowsky<sup>5</sup>

My experience previously as an author using traditional peer-review models has not been exceptional. Sometimes, I received incredibly helpful feedback that led me toward new ways to express my ideas that strengthened the manuscript; and sometimes I received not very useful feedback ranging from apathetic to unnecessarily harsh with incomprehensible suggestions that made me wonder why the peer bothered reviewing the piece. I serve as a peer reviewer myself on a couple of journals using traditional review, and I have co-edited books also using this model and, although I was generally happy with the process in both of those roles, I wanted to try something different with the *C&RL* special issue that would better align it with intent toward being inclusive of critical viewpoints and aspirations for fabulation (dreaming toward new paradigms). For my introduction to the special issue, I put out a call to the authors for interested parties to serve as reviewers in hopes that the process would come full circle, putting myself in a more vulnerable position to receive feedback from those I had reviewed. Of course, the entirety of this process will not work in all situations, but for this special issue and this group of collaborators, it was harmonious in working relationally toward expanding conversations. As mentioned earlier in this article, power structures exist that silence or introduce roadblocks for those from historically marginalized groups. Trying something different was a way to share more power among all parties

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<sup>5</sup> Pagowsky, N. (2022). Critique as care: Disrupting narratives of the one-shot instruction model. *College and Research Libraries*, 83(5), 713-725. <https://crl.acrl.org/index.php/crl/article/view/25576/33460>

involved in this special issue, while additionally making the labor of revision and review more visible. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) draws out how distance equates to objectivity, and how objectivity legitimizes and enhances power; for researchers and scholars, we also can see this as the impersonal and the rational, and why traditional review can carry such weight in reinforcing status and maintenance of hierarchies. Working to share power, decrease the impersonality (when agreed upon and when it feels safe), and rely on collaboration through community buy-in is one way to benefit from the review process.

### What We Got Out It

Across these four experiences, the prevailing theme centers on how refreshing it was to try something new like developmental peer review after the often restrictive and demoralizing experiences that can come from traditional review. This approach allowed the authors to try something novel within the rigidity of the scholarship process that provided space for dialogue and conversation among the authors, the reviewers, and the editors, allowing for deeper development of the writing itself. Space for vulnerability and empathy among those involved in developmental peer review was supportive in a way that further clarified the ideas of the writing itself. Refocusing on the authors rather than on the anonymity of the reviewers ensured accountability among all parties. Authors were able to be more vulnerable and take risks in their writing through a format of relationality and empathy; the format created space for changes that were supported for the overall output of the special issue. As a whole, this process demonstrated to the authors and reviewers that a rethinking of what, why, and how we engage with peer review as a professional practice needs to be undertaken within librarianship. The process fostered solidarity and community to engage with critical approaches toward what we take for granted in our publishing structures.

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