Educating Rita

In the 1983 film Educating Rita, a Cockney lass catches the curiosity of a curmudgeonly professor by making perceptive but untutored remarks about the staging of Ibsen’s play, Peer Gynt. The professor, Frank Bryant, takes a shining to this unbelied gem and instructs her in the proper mores of literary analysis. As sharp as she is plucky, Rita is soon running with the campus elite, trading the sour disdain of her erstwhile mentor for the thrill of being part of the academic “in crowd.” Although she answers her final exam with the impenetrable prose that Bryant associates with the heavy toll of compromise his personal and professional lives have exacted, he’s fulfilled to find that Rita retains the spark he nurtured in the first place.

What does this movie have to do with a paper about peer review? For that matter, what is such a paper doing in a journal devoted to learning and education in the first place?

To answer the first question, Educating Rita is, among other things, a cautionary tale about how disciplinary standards can homogenize and sterilize newcomers’ insights—precisely what Art Bedeian’s analysis of the peer review process asserts. As for the second question, peer review is among the most powerful socializing devices exercised by business schools, and is thus central in educating the professoriate.

Bedeian—always the provocateur—follows a simple logic to make a profound point. To begin with, knowledge is socially constructed. Although the relevant literature is admirably reviewed here, this is not a new proposition. But, it takes on special poignancy when peer review is considered because the process is undeniably social in nature. The negotiations among authors, referees, and editor most certainly result in tailored knowledge claims. To be sure, peer review protects broadly accepted standards. But four or fewer arbitrators do not make for a representative sample, and the likelihood of idiosyncratic interests seeping in is enormous. Bedeian claims that the result is all too often the violation of authorial voice; that what authors set out to say is compromised, sometimes beyond recognition. Bedeian concludes with ten rectifying recommendations, such as greater use of footnotes, publishing referee comments, and a meaningful formal appeal procedure, all of which could be reasonably instituted by any journal.

The work featured in Exemplary Contributions has been properly aimed at either the intellectual and institutional forces that shape higher education in management or at the explication of dynamics that influence individual learning. The exception was Trank and Rynes (2003), who ventured into the realm of professionalization by tallying management’s score against firmly grounded benchmarks. Bedeian’s paper is complementary inasmuch as it deconstructs a professional practice, revealing it as a socialization mechanism that has unintended and, perhaps, undesirable consequences.

Although cast in Kuhnian light, for AMLE the educational implications of Bedeian’s paper are salient. Is there a more powerful educational force for the professoriate than peer review? Surely our doctoral programs and university promotion standards are crucial, but aren’t they geared around peer review? Doctoral programs teach a body of knowledge and the discovery process, but they also emphasize the importance of disseminating discoveries. Appointment, tenure, and promotion decisions are often carried by candidates’ success in disseminating new knowledge. Additional incentive for faculty to master peer review is that rewards are directly related to publications (Gomez-Mejia & Balkin, 1992).

There are those that will find the educational impact of the review process just as it should be: tough and fair. But if we’re honest, most of us have chaffed under its bit, feeling that the requested changes were unnecessary or distracting, or puzzling as to how to satisfy diametrically opposed referee comments. Given the weight assigned to publishing, it is fair to ask if the instructional elements of peer review are intentional and, if so, do they convey the messages that our discipline finds most important? Further, how do the messages learned from peer review affect the manner in which we instruct our students? Do the publishing paradigms of professors impact the pedagogy intended to produce practice? Or are we merely educating Rita?

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REFERENCES
