

Editorial Roulette

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When Professor John Doe was very young, he became an assistant professor of education. Naturally, he lusted for tenure. He knew that published writing contributes to a young professor's arrival at this honorable estate. So, encouraged by the publication of two of his articles in professional journals, he made some minor revisions in his doctoral dissertation and sent it, unsolicited, to an eminent book publisher. His manuscript was rejected by publishing house after publishing house, with intervening and excruciating delays. Eventually young John Doe grew tired of this experience. His dissertation revision now yellows in a closet used only by passing spiders.

Nowhere in his doctoral ordeal by fire had John Doe learned that the chances of publication of a lightly revised doctoral thesis are only slightly better than those of the proverbial snowball in hell. No one had bothered to suggest that the chances of the snowball may even be better than those of the unsolicited education manuscript coming in over the transom to a textbook publisher's office.

John Doe grew older and wiser. He wrote many more articles, achieved tenure, rose through the ranks, and was recognized as an able educator. People recognized that he had some important things to say about education. He decided to write a textbook that could be used in his favorite education course.

This time he sought the counsel of his most experienced colleagues. They advised him to develop the holy trinity revered by textbook publishers--a query- letter, a detailed outline, and a sample chapter. He sent this trio simultaneously to half a dozen publishers, and, happily, one deemed it a distinct possibility. Might editor Richard Roe and the author (a lovely word) meet at a convention or, if the author happened to be visiting Big City, at the editor's office? Meanwhile, editor Roe would send the prospectus off to "outside readers" for "review."

After Richard Roe's cordial hosting of John Doe over an expensive lunch (tax deductible), weeks became months while John Doe waited. "Hurry up and wait" is the rule in publishing as in the armed forces. Eventually the great day came, An Agreement to publish your Work.

After hastily scanning the legal form, John Doe joyfully signed. At last, a contract allowing him to communicate his ideas to his profession! His query letter had carefully pointed out how his education book would differ from what the publishers liked to call his competitors, how it would be more creative and original, more scholarly yet more readable. And his proposal had been accepted! Now he had an iron-clad contract committing a company to publish his book. Professor John Doe settled down for a year or so of combining teaching with writing the Work.

But John Doe was in for some surprises. Editor Richard Roe sent him the "suggestions" of the anonymous readers of his proposal and strongly urged that he incorporate their recommendations. Many of the suggestions were helpful but others seemed, to John, inappropriate. So he used his own best judgment--after all, it was his book, wasn't it? Editor Richard Roe modestly indicated his own lack of background in Professor John Doe's field and explained that still other outside readers as well as the in-house staff would review his first draft. Then Professor Doe would revise and submit a second draft, which in turn would be reviewed by some outside readers. After another revision by the author, John Doe would send in his final draft, which would be reviewed by a reader or two for the last time. Then the manuscript would be copy-edited.

So John Doe found himself engaged along with Richard Roe in the game of editorial roulette that contemporary textbook publishers play. The underlying theory is impeccable. The assumption is made that some high priests of the educational temple exist and that they can tell the editor and, via the editor, the author what should and should not appear in the manuscript. In the name of fostering scientific objectivity, the operation is shrouded in anonymity. The manuscript reviewers are not to know who the author is. The author is not to know who the reviewers are. Only the editor knows who all the parties are.

But education is neither revelation nor science. Potential reviewers vary widely in their philosophies, values, and ideologies. They are often turned on by some educational concepts and turned off by other ideas. They subscribe to varied schools of thought. They are mortal humans who are fallible. And they have their differing enthusiasms, preferences, antipathies, and even prejudices. They have varying standards, theories, and commitments. Inescapably, their variant perceptions and backgrounds influence their appraisals of a manuscript and their suggestions to the editor.

Moreover, high priests of the educational temple seem to be in short supply, or at least often busy with other rites. More available are prospective authors whom a company wants to scout, practitioners recommended by book salesmen, acquaintances made by editors or sales representatives at conventions, educators who somehow come to the attention of publishers (sometimes through reactions to an earlier book), and so forth. The selection of readers is influenced by the prudence and great modesty of publishers in payment of honoraria to readers. So the possible readers of John Doe's manuscript, earnest educators all, had a varied assortment of backgrounds and views and standards.

From his pool of possible outside readers, editor Richard Roe selected seven and wrote to them. Four of these agreed to read and react. It took a long time to get back all the reviews. Editor Richard Roe fretted some at the delay, but not as much as author John Doe. Eventually, all reactions were received.

Not too surprisingly, the reviews of the outside readers varied. One pronounced John Doe's manuscript highly publishable and compared his style with that of eminent literary figures. A second reader thought the treatment adequate though not outstanding and recommended publication. A third declared the manuscript a clinker and described

eloquently how it differed from the desirable philosophy and orientation held by the reader. A fourth condemned the manuscript as worthless and the style as miserable and strongly implied that had a perceptive company invited him/her to write such a book it would be fundamentally different and infinitely superior. Editor Richard Roe was understandably uncertain.

The reviews, carefully masked to assure the outside readers' anonymity, were sent to John Doe so that he might revise the Work. John struggled with the inconsistent perceptions and produced his second draft. Again his manuscript went to some readers. A long period of nothing happening followed. Editor Richard Roe occasionally explained that the reviews were slow in coming in. Then a flurry of correspondence between editor Roe and author Doe.

Finally there came a sad day for John Doe. Gently, with tact and with many expressions of regret, editor Roe called to John's attention a standard provision in the Agreement author John Doe had eagerly signed. The provision read, "If prior to publication the Author shall not deliver the manuscript and ancillary materials as herein contemplated, or if any part thereof is not satisfactory to the Publisher in its judgment (emphasis added), the Publisher may terminate this Agreement by written notice to the Author by registered or certified mail, whereupon the only obligation of the Publisher shall be to return to the Author any manuscript or property received from the Author." The contract was not bound in iron, as John had assumed. The publisher's agreement contained a built-in bail-out.

But happy endings are preferable to sad endings. John Doe persisted and again queried more textbook publishers concerning the same manuscript. Another publishing house indicated some interest. This time one of the four faceless readers implied that Tolstoy was turning over in his grave in envy of this remarkable Work. A second thought it quite competent. A third deemed it adequate, though he/she personally regretted certain omissions and inclusions. A fourth pronounced it hopeless. John Doe's book was published by this second publisher.

So, in the second round, John won the game of editorial roulette that publishers play. He and his new publisher lived happily ever after--at least until author John Doe wrote still another manuscript.

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