

## RE-ALIGNING THE HURDLES: THE DILEMMAS OF QUALITY IN SCHOLARLY JOURNAL PUBLICATION

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### Abstract

This paper was inspired by two main factors related to our association with *Perspectives in Education* (PIE) as members of the editorial board and trainers for the writing for publication workshops run under the Authorship Development Project (AUDEPRO). As members of the editorial board of PIE, we had to grapple with the reality of belonging to a team of 'gatekeepers' or 'guardians of academic traditions', which had very little consensus about what constituted publishable knowledge or scholarly discourse, let alone the mandate to make judgements and decisions on certification of knowledge through publication. As trainers for AUDEPRO committed to socializing disadvantaged members of the academic community into a scholarly discourse, we were able to develop a critical awareness about the complexity of issues confronting prospective editors in their encounter with journal editors. These issues range from the quality and relevance of a manuscript, the criteria for assessing the significance of discourse style, forms of presentation, the uncertainties surrounding the bases for making judgements and decision-making in the review process to the implications of the decisions editors have to make.

Within the South African context, as in general academic practices, scholarly journal publication has been associated with "the pursuit of academic excellence", maintenance of "high academic standards" in line with "international standards". This jargon has been unproblematically accepted irrespective of its obvious ambiguities. We argue in this paper that scholarly journal publication cannot remain within the narrow boundaries of traditional South African academic culture, particularly if we take into consideration the fact "that ours is a field characterized by paradigm proliferation and, consequently, the sort of field in which there is little consensus about what research and scholarship are and what research reporting and scholarly discourse should look like" (Donmoyer, 1996). Nor can the policies, procedures, and decision rules, articulated to guide the manuscript review process remain uncontested. As we engaged with these policies, procedures and decision rules in our writing for publication workshops,

increasingly we became clear about the obscurity, mysticism and inconsistency surrounding them and the need to problematize them.

**RE-ALIGNING THE HURDLES:  
The Dilemmas of Quality Control  
in Scholarly Journal Publication**

*Over the past 20 years, the scholarly and journal publishing communities - publishers, librarians, scientists, and their funders - have been victims of a vicious cycle brought on in part by conflicting beliefs based on conjecture and myth. Perpetuating these myths has led to some devastating mistakes (CASP News Digest (Consortium for African Scholarly Publishing), July 1996, vol 1 no 2, p.8)*

**Introduction**

This paper was inspired by two main factors related to our association with *Perspectives in Education* (PIE) as members of the editorial board and trainers for the writing for publication workshops run under the Authorship Development Project (AUDEPRO). As members of the editorial board of PIE, we had to grapple with the reality of belonging to a team of 'gatekeepers' or 'guardians of academic traditions', which had very little consensus about what constituted publishable knowledge or scholarly discourse, let alone the mandate to make judgements and decisions on certification of knowledge through publication. As trainers for AUDEPRO committed to socializing disadvantaged members of the academic community into a scholarly discourse, we were able to develop a critical awareness about the complexity of issues confronting prospective editors in their encounter with journal editors. These issues range from the quality and relevance of a manuscript, the criteria for assessing the significance of discourse style, forms of presentation, the uncertainties surrounding the bases for making judgements and decision-making in the review process to the implications of the decisions editors have to make.

Within the South African context, as in general academic practices, scholarly journal publication has been associated with "the pursuit of academic excellence", maintenance of "high academic standards" in line with "international standards". This jargon has been unproblematically accepted irrespective of its obvious ambiguities. As Weber has correctly put it "The idea of 'excellence' and the idea of 'accepted international standards' are... presumed to be eternal and valid for all time, irrespective of the specific socio-economic context which in fact

defines their meaning".<sup>1</sup> This is a world that many members of the academy<sup>2</sup> in South Africa are "very happy to work in and want to defend, but which others find intolerable".<sup>3</sup>

We argue in this paper that scholarly journal publication cannot remain within the narrow boundaries of traditional South African academic culture, particularly if we take into consideration the fact "that ours is a field characterized by paradigm proliferation and, consequently, the sort of field in which there is little consensus about what research and scholarship are and what research reporting and scholarly discourse should look like".<sup>4</sup> Nor can the policies, procedures, and decision rules, articulated to guide the manuscript review process remain uncontested.<sup>5</sup> As we engaged with these policies, procedures and decision rules in our writing for publication workshops, increasingly we became clear about the obscurity, mysticism and inconsistency surrounding them and the need to problematize them. In doing so, we share some of Donmoyer's concerns on the dilemmas facing a journal's editor in the era of paradigm proliferation, which has direct bearing on the challenges we face in our training and editorial work. The argument developed in this paper is in line with the recommendation of the National Commission for Higher Education which states that "The Commission envisages a transformed system that will be able to contribute to the advancement of all forms of knowledge and scholarship, in keeping with internationally observed standards of academic

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<sup>1</sup> Everard Weber, "Perishing by publishing: academic appointments, the liberal universities and the liberatory struggle in South Africa", Mimeo, p.2.

<sup>2</sup> By academy I do not mean just the institutional setting in which this particular intellectual practice takes place, but the whole academic and professional tradition binding all those involved in the pursuit of knowledge. It includes the library or archive of information commonly and, in some of its aspects, unanimously held. What binds the members of the academy together is a family of ideas, a unifying set of values proven in various ways to be effective, which provide the members with a mentality, a genealogy, an atmosphere, which allow them to deal with and to see social phenomena and knowledge in a particular way. It functions as a sort of guild community with its own internal traditions and peculiar ways of behaviour, learning and appropriation of knowledge. Publication of professional journals represents an important factor for the maintenance and reproduction of this community. This somewhat unproblematic order of things is what this paper is trying to question.

<sup>3</sup> Weber, "Letter to the Editor", p.4.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Donmoyer, "Educational research in an era of paradigm proliferation: What's a journal editor do?", *Educational Researcher*, March 1996, p.19.

<sup>5</sup> Donmoyer, 1996, p.19.

quality, and **with sensitivity to the diverse problems and demands of the local, national, Southern African and African contexts**".<sup>6</sup>

More precisely, our experience in AUDEPRO and as "gatekeepers" has shown that academic practitioners not only have different understandings about the nature of intellectual discourse as they have differing assumptions and understandings about a whole range of issues connected with their academic practice in research and publications. These assumptions and understandings are largely tacit, undisclosed and very often taken for granted. Quine calls these assumptions "webs of belief", which are invoked in different situations and work to regulate our behaviour in those situations, especially to frustrate efforts to transform prevailing practices.<sup>7</sup> To paraphrase Moore, "**it is only by uncovering these in unthreatening ways, and negotiating acceptable alternatives, that we are able to achieve the kinds of movement we seek**",<sup>8</sup> movement towards a more contextualised scholarly practice, yet internationally appealing to the mainstream community of scholars.

#### **General background: Fort Hare debate on research and publication**

In 1992, a debate was initiated at the University of Fort Hare around the establishment of a national forum of social scientists. The forum was intended to have an impact on research transformation, research capacity building, the promotion of scholarship and the development of a publications culture among historically disadvantaged scholars. In the process, three major problems were identified: (i) the question of under representation of women and of black scholars in the South African scholarly journal publication system; (ii) limited dissemination of research produced by black scholars, particularly in historically black universities; and (iii) the fact that South African professional journals, particularly those with accreditation, are largely edited by white male academics, who are often not particularly sensitive to the dramatic disadvantages facing the majority of women and black scholars in the area of research and publications.

At the meeting, the question of power and control of knowledge production and dissemination came to the fore. There were those who called for

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<sup>6</sup> National Commission on Higher Education, "An overview of a new policy framework for higher education transformation", 22 August 1996 (Press copy), pp.5-6.

<sup>7</sup> See W Quine and J Ullian, *The Web of Belief* (New York: Random House, 1970).

<sup>8</sup> Robin Stanley Moore, "The role of student writing in learning zoology". Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education (English Second Language) of Rhodes University, p.2, 1995.

an epistemological break with the dominant paradigms in the production and dissemination of knowledge, for a shift of the boundaries of the canon and legitimization of silenced forms of knowledge. It was felt, for example, that unless women and black intellectuals have a role in setting professional standards in research and publication, more specifically in deciding what sort of knowledge is publishable, very limited change could be achieved. There were those who stressed the need to demystify the nature of research and scholarly publication. There were also those who called for the need to take control of the means of production and dissemination of knowledge. As an immediate need they highlighted the importance of an alternative professional journal free of the power relations which govern most scholarly journals in South Africa.

Words of caution were however sounded. Some warned against the danger of falling into a wishful thinking trap. They highlighted the complexity and the difficulty of establishing and running a new journal effectively. For obvious reasons, we sympathise with them. Mkwandawire, ex-general secretary of CODESRIA spoke about "the one volume, one issue syndrome" which has been frustrating African enthusiasm in journal publication. After the excitement leading to the first volume and first issue of a journal, he pointed out, nothing else happens. The journal dies. Drawing on the American experience, some warned about the danger of ghettoisation and self-marginalization of black scholars for creating an alternative journal without carefully thinking through the procedures, challenges and the problems involved. Instead, they suggested determined and systematic inroads into the mainstream journals. Other participants warned against two emerging anti-intellectual extremes: the assumption that knowledge produced by white scholars is necessarily meaningless to the African context and the assumption that knowledge produced by blacks is necessarily meaningful.<sup>9</sup>

Having embraced the idea of alternative publishing, the Fort Hare meeting stressed however that the deliberations made should not be interpreted as an acceptance or tolerance of mediocrity:

we are not saying that whatever is black-generated must be published". There should be rules, standards and mechanisms of quality control. We are striving for excellence but within our own parameters or those parameters which take seriously our own context and epistemologies grounded on our own experience, and as such internationally acceptable.

<sup>9</sup> Blade Dzimande, 1992).

Within this particular paradigm "excellence" does not mean replicating the forms and patterns of knowledge production dictated by western discourses or arising out of concerns with the pressures of globalization. It means participating in the endeavours of the world intellectual community through an active engagement with the problems and issues concerning Africa and the South African context, using appropriate tools.

### Authorship development

Three important ideas emerged out of the Fort Hare meeting central to the argument pursued in this paper. First, the issue of control required the restructuring of our editorial board and a review of our editorial policy, a process we had already initiated. To stress that as members of the editorial board, we were made to know that the limited number of publications by black scholars in *Perspectives in Education* was very often interpreted as a manifestation of racism. The sensitivity of our former editors to the question of redress made the task easy to accomplish. When a new editorial board took over in 1989, a process of restructuring had been initiated with the following main objectives: (i) the establishment of a more representative editorial board and a network of consulting editors in terms of race, gender and understanding of the South African context; (ii) the upgrading of journal standards for accreditation purposes; and (iii) promotion of publications by African and South African women and black scholars. While the first two objectives were easily achieved, the last objective remained far from satisfactory.

However, as the process of restructuring unfolded, it became clear that the revision of the editorial policy, the establishment of a more representative body of consulting and editorial members could not, by themselves, solve the problem. For us, this pointed to the need for systematic training and capacity building schemes to address the problem. Meaningful participation of women and black scholars in scholarly work required a direct intervention through training in writing for scholarly publication.<sup>10</sup> Note that the question of representivity of the journal's editorial body very often collided with our commitment to a professional ethos. The experience warned us about the danger of having "rubber stamps" within the editorial team, who not only do not do their work but also are not committed to the redress concerns of PIE.

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<sup>10</sup> Not only would this strategy bring young scholars to the mainstream publication but would also avoid running the risk of building a monopoly in publications by those scholars who have already been socialized into the culture of publication. Given the prevailing tradition in research and writing training, an overwhelming majority of promising young authors, particularly women and black scholars, would remain excluded.

The nature of the training in writing for scholarly publication was dictated by our particular experience on the editorial board. The editorial process had highlighted that the conceptual and technical problems encountered by most scholars in South Africa reflected the training received in most South African universities, which do not pay attention to the importance of publication. It was not unusual for example to receive full length research reports, theses, extremely long papers, or journalistic writings that could not by any means meet the requirements of any national or international professional journal. These writings were obviously returned to the authors with comments on how to transform them into publishable form. Obviously, not all authors were pleased with PIE's response.

PIE therefore decided to engage in systematic training in the area of writing for journal publication, adding to the support provided by the editorial board through detailed commentary on the work submitted to the journal. As has been pointed out, this was based on the assumption that redress policies in terms of race and gender -- and the transformation of the research and publication system in South Africa -- required serious capacity building strategies. An effective redress necessitated foundational work and skills transfer to ensure an "epistemological access" for new scholars. In journal publication in particular, the promotion of black scholarship and sustainable high standards in academic journals depend not only on comprehensive and systematic research training but also on a supply of people with editorial skills and knowledge of the processes and dynamics of journal publication. Then, PIE decided to expand its activities beyond journal publication to include training through the Authorship Development Project (AUDEPRO).<sup>11</sup> Through workshops and a mentorship programme, AUDEPRO ensures that every trainee produces a publishable article and is assisted in finding a suitable publication outlet. Among the issues covered are: knowledge production and dissemination

<sup>11</sup> Since its inception in 1994, AUDEPRO has run eight workshops at historically black universities with an average participation of 15 scholars per workshop. The pilot workshop was followed by August 1995, one at the University of the North (joint workshop with the University of Venda) in September 1995, one at the University of Zululand and one at the University of Durban-Westville. We also ran further workshops at the University of Fort Hare in October 1995 at the request of the Govan Mbeki Fellowship Programme. A week-long workshop for trainers has been scheduled for the first half of 1997. The workshop programme will culminate in the publication of handbooks or workbooks. AUDEPRO also provided support to a working group established by the Authorship Development Forum, recently established at the University of the Western Cape, to write and publish a reader on Social Psychology. Following this successful experience, the Authorship Development Forum at UWC has also solicited our collaboration for setting up a working group which will prepare articles for a special journal issue.

in the South African context; turning research into journal articles and dynamics and processes in journal publication.

AUDEPRO adopts a hands-on approach to support each individual participant in improving her/his work, drawing on the expertise and experience of a pool of resource persons and the role of peer review, and using an interactive approach. Training individual participants has considerable institutional impact in that it has a multiplier effect. As they begin to succeed, participants are able to influence their peers and to transfer their skills to colleagues and students in their own institutions.

This is another worthwhile initiative to be considered seriously by all those concerned with promoting scholarship in institutions of higher learning. Depending on material support and logistics, AUDEPRO hopes to expand the project to include research training components such as proposal writing, report writing, data presentation and so forth.

There has been widespread and positive response to AUDEPRO's programme and, although a tracer study is underway to measure practical results of the programme, we have an indication that out of the twelve scholars who attended the pilot workshop, seven have published their work, three overseas and four in South Africa. Although PIE does not require that participants submit their work to the journal, the number of worthy submissions by black scholars has increased considerably. Most participants of the workshops constitute part of the team of our reviewers of submissions.

Feedback from participants at the workshops suggests a gradual realisation of the importance and need for research and publications. Participants all agree that these workshops are a source of inspiration and that, more than ever before, they are determined to start doing research and publishing on contemporary issues. It emerges very often in their personal accounts that some academics regarded research and publications as an exclusive privilege of academics at historically white universities. Some of them confessed that they had never bothered in the past about anything in the line of research and publications because they thought that it was their role only to teach. However, the general consensus from among beginners and experienced authors is that workshops such as these have unearthed some hidden potentials of aspiring academics and researchers. Isaac Mtswoe participated in the pilot workshop and joined our team as a facilitator in a workshop run at the University of the North. He is very pragmatic about the value of these workshops: "I found the workshops stimulating and very timely given the urgent need to build capacity and the development of research and publications especially in HBUs". For him, demystifying research and publications, building confidence and helping researchers and writers to be self-reflexive are some of the effects of the programme. "The workshops gave me an opportunity to reflect on my own work



in respect of research and have made me more determined to do more research and to publish".

However, it appears that the way the workshops impact on individual

participants depends on each one's backgrounds. For Themané, lecturer at UNIN, "The workshop addressed some of my fears regarding my own writing skills and style on research and publications". For Professor A. Mawasha, Head of the Department of Mathematics Education at UNIN, who participated in Turfloop's workshop, the programme provides an opportunity for individual and inter-institutional networking around research and publications. He suggested for example that all participants should constitute a group to benefit from peer support and to link up with AUDEPRO for follow-up and future initiatives. For this purpose, a contact person was elected at the workshop. This approach has prevailed in all the workshops. For Dr Angina Parekh, Head of the Psychology Department at UDW, who has already some experience in journal publications, the programme provides context for participants to share their experience in writing and publishing. She noted for example that the workshop helps considerably "in translating what we do intuitively into a more conscious and intelligent procedure". Of particular interest to this paper are however the issues raised at the workshop run at the University of Zululand. Using examples from their experiences in submission of articles to South African journals several participants questioned the criteria and processes of review. Professor A A Okharedia put it as follows:

Isn't writing a logical function of an individual's personality, which is shaped by a particular cultural context, academic environment and intellectual tradition? If this is so, how can reviewers who come from different academic traditions with different intellectual concerns be objective in their assessment of an article. Is your journal different from other journals?

Throughout the discussion, it became clear that the review process is generally justified as a means for ensuring quality and high standards. These standards are based on conventional principles and norms, which presupposes consensus that does not exist. Also, there is no clarity about the assumptions which inform them. In some cases, the aspects which provided arguments for rejection by some journals gave strong grounds for acceptance of the papers by other journals. This is complicated by the changing discourses and paradigms in knowledge production in contemporary social science.

### **Shifting paradigms and quality control in knowledge production and dissemination**

In traditional sense, an academic journal is a mechanism through which an institution - university or professional society - with its own boundaries, structures of apprenticeship and rules of behaviour asserts its scholarship, determines its identity as active participant in knowledge production, dissemination and utilization. Most importantly, through professional journals academic or scientific communities assert their autonomy over the internal affairs of the community and their authority over canonization of knowledge. They select and institutionalise knowledge through publication on the basis of established norms and procedures whereby knowledge is produced, validated and communicated.<sup>12</sup> This process is delegated to a matured academic elite - journal referees.

Generally referees are expected to give their opinion about the following possible decisions: (i) publish as is; (ii) publish with minor modifications; (iii) publish if revised; (iv) revise and resubmit; (v) reject. These decisions are based on a set of assumptions about what publishable knowledge is or ought to be which are not always explicit. Referees have to decide on what counts as knowledge and, more specifically, on what counts as publishable knowledge. In doing so, they draw implicitly if not explicitly on what the norms governing the ways they produce knowledge - appropriate methods, procedures and techniques - and the prescriptions regulating how this knowledge should be reported to the community of their peers. Codes of best practice and sets of rules, which determine legitimate knowledge, and the criteria which define success and failure, are developed and used in this case. With reference to them, referees may suggest certain revisions, and recommend acceptance or rejection.

Despite the pervasive nature of academic societies, these are not static. They are constantly changing as new members adhere to the society's culture and other members exit by free choice or rejection. As a result, the boundaries of academic organisations become blurred, notions of competence within organizations become redefined. Thus, we argue in this regard that, if the intellectual community represented by the journal has changed, the norms that have governed the production of knowledge within it have changed, then the means and mechanisms which assess the quality of knowledge should necessarily be adapted. A new consensus among the community of practitioners should be reached.

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<sup>12</sup> Gibbons et al, p.32.

### New modes of knowledge production and their implications for quality control

Cross argued elsewhere<sup>13</sup> that South African leading scholars have gone a long way in re-adjusting and refining timely their theoretical and analytical tools within the parameters set by the academy to address the changing historical circumstances. He went further to show that they have however done very little to redress the constraints imposed by increasing professionalisation of production of knowledge within the academy. They have not come to terms with the silences which this professionalisation seem to legitimise. Neither have they accounted for the fact that the boundaries of formal analysis they proclaim and attempt to universalise remain too rigid and hierarchizing. Further, he contends that the production of knowledge takes place in different sites and under different dynamics. Particular 'grammars' in these sites regulate the flow of information and meanings, and impose restrictions about what information is acceptable as knowledge and what knowledge is socially useful. He suggests that what is required is an analytical and interpretative framework with enough flexibility to account for the different frames of reference involved in the different contexts where social phenomena are processed and made intelligible. For this to materialize, attention should be given to the practices of knowledge production outside the academy or discarded by it as unscholarly.<sup>14</sup> This is an issue that has been ignored and met with almost complete silence by social scientists, and disregarded by the canonisers of knowledge in South Africa. He summarises his arguments as follows:

... there are different epistemologies within and outside the academy and as such multiple locations of ... knowledge. These epistemologies lead to different degrees of knowing or different bodies of knowledge. It is not claimed that these bodies of knowledge have the same theoretical status. The important fact is that the recognition of these epistemologies represents a breakthrough or an important departure from the prevailing discourses of knowledge production.

<sup>13</sup> M Cross, "Changing frontiers of academic discourse: knowledge, power and the production of history in South Africa", paper presented to the History Workshop, University of the Witwatersrand, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Note that the professionalisation of production of knowledge has been accompanied by greater selectiveness and closure.

The ideas advocated in his paper, which did not have much echo in South Africa at the time, were precipitated by a recent publication entitled *The New Production of Knowledge*.<sup>15</sup> The authors of the book argue that there has been a shift from traditional forms of knowledge production - which they call Mode I - to new forms of knowledge production - Mode II. Mode I knowledge production refers to our traditional or orthodox, disciplinary knowledge production based within the academy. The main mechanism of quality control is peer evaluation. As Mouton put it, "**Mode I knowledge quality control depends heavily on the integrity of the peer evaluation system; the idea that one submits one's ideas to a group of equally (at least) expert scholars**".<sup>16</sup> These are judged to be competent to act as peers by their contributions in a particular discipline. Typical forms of dissemination of knowledge include established institutional means such as books, journal articles and conference proceedings.

As an expression of Mode II, knowledge is increasingly being produced in the context of application, i.e. in the course of providing solutions to problems. Mode II knowledge is heterogenous, i.e. it is produced in a multiplicity of sites within and outside the academy, the linkages between these sites is constantly changing and there is increasing differentiation of fields and areas of studies at these sites, leading to new specialisations. Mode II knowledge is also characterized by *transdisciplinarity* which

- \* develops new theoretical frameworks, research methods and modes of practice appropriate to the application or problem-solving context;
- \* though contributes to knowledge production, is not necessarily concerned with primary knowledge or advancement of discipline-based knowledge, particularly important to this paper; and
- \* generates its forms of knowledge dissemination.

These include sharing of ideas among producers of knowledge as they generate or apply knowledge to problem-solving.

Unlike disciplinary research, in *transdisciplinary* inquiry, researchers are often located in different departments of an institution and different institutions. Significant numbers of scientists choose to work on problems that lie outside

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<sup>15</sup> M Gibbons, C Limoges, H Nowotny, S Schwartzman, P Scott, M Trow, *The New Production of Knowledge. The Dynamics of science and Research in Contemporary societies* (London: Sage Publications, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> J Mouton, "New modes of knowledge production: The Gibbons thesis", Paper delivered at a seminar on "New modes of knowledge production", Department of Education, UCT, 1996.

their specialism or form teams with other specialism. Their product cannot remain uncontaminated. As Gibbons et al put it, "Hybridisation reflects the need of different communities to speak in more than one language in order to communicate at the boundaries and in the spaces between systems and subsystems."<sup>17</sup> Unless their performance is evaluated by an expanded peer group, their outputs may be called into question. Although, the authors seem to imply that the reporting of research seems to be relegated to a secondary level, we would like to suggest that journals may have to review their policies to have a significant role under the new circumstances.

As problem-solving as opposed to disciplinary research increases, Mode II adds the **applicability** as a new criterion for quality control. Whether Mode I is being replaced by Mode two, whether Mode I co-exists with Mode II or whether Mode II is just a peripheral part of Mode I, it is an issue which we are not concerned with in this paper. The reality is that the traditional academic culture, i.e. professional societies, the values and norms of academic disciplines, insulated specialists have to be reconciled with the new intellectual climate as described in Mode II. Whatever this means, it appears that traditional constructs of what constitutes good research and knowledge have become an object of contestation.

### Shifting paradigms in knowledge production in South Africa

South African social theory can be described as a battleground between the mainstream eurocentric orthodoxy with its different nuances in the form of liberal, radical and nationalist perspectives, on the one hand, and Africanist perspectives, on the other. These include: (i) general Africanist perspectives (ii) black perspectives; (iii) African nationalist perspectives informed by the "New South Africanism". Africanism proclaims that all African people find themselves in a similar predicament, share some cultural elements and have suffered discrimination in one form or another.<sup>18</sup> "New South Africanism" re-asserts a South African identity within the wider context of Africaness.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Gibbons et al, p.37.

<sup>18</sup> Ran Greenstein, "Education, identity and curriculum policies in the New South Africa" (Johannesburg: EPU/Wits, 1995), p.11.

<sup>19</sup> 'New South Africanism' is derived from the current concept of 'New South Africa', which refers to South Africa beyond apartheid in which all its 'population groups' are recognized as citizens with full political and civil rights. For details see "Inventing and re-inventing "South Africanism": Education, power and identity in South Africa" (Department of Education: Wits, 1996).

In general, Africanist perspectives operate within a framework which takes as a point of departure continent-wide environmental, social and historical similarities regardless of skin colour, nationality, ethnicity or facial features of the people concerned.<sup>20</sup> Its variations differ mainly on their focus. For example, black perspectives emphasise blackness as the most important feature of the African people and the uniqueness of their historical experience and shared heritage as blacks.

The mainstream orthodoxy has been dealt with elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> For the purpose of this paper, we concentrate on the last four emerging perspectives, which essentially call for a new African-oriented paradigm. Three main features characterise these perspectives. First, they all have in common the fact that they are informed by particular discourses of representation or, more appropriately, self-representation around issues of diversity, identity and power. Second, they all press for the reinsertion of South Africa in its African context, the need for South Africans to regain a sense of their place and dignity to be able to function effectively in the world while facilitating a decisive move away from dominant Eurocentric paradigms.<sup>22</sup> As such, they also place greater emphasis on the need for accounting for the uniqueness of the African and black historical experience, very often neglected by the orthodox radical social theory in South Africa - the need to shift away from theory distant from passion and politics. Third, they celebrate afrocentricity as opposed to eurocentricity and tend to privilege the production of indigenous knowledge or knowledge embedded in the African experience.

In some cases, Africanist perspectives have been met with scepticism due to the fact that their protagonists have not been able to go beyond narrow ideological terms without any helpful attempt to develop suitable or alternative methodological and epistemological bases. As a result, many academics tend to replicate with minor variations insights attuned to western literature or within the theoretical confinements of the orthodoxy. Most speakers who participated in the Venda's debate on the "Africanization of the university" were successful in drawing from the American, British and Australian experience to provide a rationale for the Africanisation project. However, most of their arguments proved self-defeating in that neither did they have an internal logic grounded on the long African experience in the struggle for Africanisation nor did they make any attempt to account for this experience. To put it differently, they played by rules

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<sup>20</sup> Ran Greenstein, "Education, identity and curriculum policies", op cit, p.11.

<sup>21</sup> See Cross, "Changing frontiers", op cit; M Cross,

<sup>22</sup> Ran Greenstein, "Education, identity and curriculum policies", op cit, p.7.

of the very same discourses they proposed to challenge. The reason for this failure is well captured by Greenstein:

... throughout the twentieth century the majority of South Africans have been indigenous people whose cultures, identities, religious, languages and forms of artistic expression exhibit significant affinities with those of their neighbours north of the Limpopo River...

**That these African connections and affinities have not occupied a prominent role in studies of South Africa has less to do with scholarly failure to recognise their existence than with the theoretical tools used to examine them.** A shift in our approach to the study of South African society would thus be a step in the reorientations of scholarship towards Africa.<sup>23</sup> [My emphasis]

There are cases however where attempts have been made to develop alternative epistemologies with profound implications on the nature of knowledge produced.

Briefly, Africanist perspectives can be interpreted in two main ways. First, as an ideology of resistance during the struggle against apartheid and tool for transformation in the process of national reconstruction. Second, as discourses which provide frameworks for alternative epistemologies for production of knowledge more suited to the African context. This particular development will certainly require a redirection of the existing policies and practices which dominate the quality control and certification of knowledge through professional or specialist publications. There are no ready-made models on which to develop solutions for this purpose. Against this background, we now look at the three main hurdles that prospective authors have to overcome before they gain entry through the gate, namely (i) the editorial board preliminary review; (ii) the review by the referees; and (iii) and consideration of the referee's reports by the editorial board.

### First hurdle: editorial board's review

In preparing an article and especially when deciding which journal to submit it to, all prospective authors are generally advised to be aware of the factors that influence an editor to accept or reject a manuscript. The most significant factors

<sup>23</sup> Greenstein, "Education, identity and curriculum policies", op cit, p. 10.

in this regard include: (i) the relevance or suitability of the manuscript to the journal's readership; (ii) the quality of presentation; (iii) the degree to which it conforms to the journal's requirements of space, standards, style (e.g. format, referencing, length) and editorial policy; and, (iv) in some cases, pedigree or academic reputation of the author (a more commercial criteria not shared by PIE). Remember the five-Ps rule: *Prior preparation prevents poor performance*.

However, the author should also be warned that he/she does not play in the hands of an individual editor, who may just say "yes" or "no". The editor does not speak out alone. He/she speaks within the debate and through the debate involving more than one role player. The goal of the debate or dialogue is to inform a decision about the article which best holds against criticism, within the journal's establishment. More precisely, the manuscript is subjected to a review process which generally involves overcoming three major hurdles: (i) consideration by the editorial board; (ii) referee's review; and (iii) editor's decision based on referees' reports.

Review procedures vary from journal to journal. Generally, when a manuscript is received it is screened by an editor or two, or perhaps by an editorial board. If the article is outside the focus of the journal, a negative decision is quickly reached and the manuscript returned. In a smaller journal, the editor may decide without consulting anyone else whether to accept or reject submitted material. In many scholarly journals, editors enlist the services of reviewers or referees (one or two or more). The referees are selected for their expertise in the field in which the article is written. They evaluate the manuscript and make recommendations to the editor.

### **Second hurdle: review by the referees**

Reviewers who evaluate a manuscript for publication are called *referees*. Generally, referees of refereed journals are considered to be peers in the profession. They are carefully chosen colleagues who are known and recognized throughout their field for their particular expertise. *Blind referees* are reviewers from whom the author's identity is concealed. This is to ensure that the article in question is more likely to be judged on its own merits than by the name or reputation of the author. *Zell's Handbook* defines refereeing as follows:

Refereeing is an integral part of knowledge industry and scholarly communication. The peer review process determines what will get published and what will be rejected, and it provides essential quality control in the publication process. **Referees - also commonly described as "readers" or "reviewers" - can be considered as the "gatekeepers" to ensure high editorial**



**standards, vigorous scholarship, and to protect a journal's credibility and standing in the academic community.**<sup>24</sup> [My emphasis]

However, as Donmoyer put it, "gatekeepers cannot normally widen the gates they monitor; they simply get to decide which sorts of people can walk through them".<sup>25</sup> Their decisions are bound up with the frames of reference drawn from their institutional cultures and academic or disciplinary discourses. Their academic practice as quality controllers is informed by a set of values, interests, theories and paradigms, which are neither explicitly spelt out, easily accessible nor commonly shared by the academic community. One can identify the following profiles of journal reviewers: guardians-of-tradition-reviewers; non-tradition-oriented-reviewers; grounded-theory-reviewers; qualitatively-oriented-work-reviewers; quantitatively-oriented-work-reviewers; progressive-reviewers; conservative-reviewers, and so forth. These profiles are related to the different ways each group of academics understand and reproduce their discipline, constitute their discourse and shape their social and intellectual practices. Depending on these profiles and the academic orientation of the journal, at least three scenarios are possible.

First, the editor can simply play the role of established "guardian of tradition" and reject work that does not match what a journal traditionally has published without review or sending work to tradition-oriented reviewers who will certainly recommend rejection, because it does not fit neatly within the frame of traditional discourse. A typical example is discourse style which separates current debates between eurocentrists and afrocentrists. It is within the confinements of these two discourses where there is a **tendency to reject "what the other" is saying as inconsistent nonsense**.<sup>26</sup> This does not exclude the fact that traditional discourses in contact with each other may sometimes conflict instead of reinforcing each other. This approach has some serious limitations. It does not account for example for the fact that universalising academic discourse is against the nature of academic discourse; for knowledge is produced in confrontation with different contexts or social situations, which gives rise to different discourses. To put it differently, scholarly discourse often looks quite different in different cultural contexts.

<sup>24</sup> Hans M Zell, "A handbook of good practice in journals publishing" (London: International African Institute: 1996), Pilot Edition, p.13.

<sup>25</sup> Donmoyer, 1996, p.20.

<sup>26</sup> Donmoyer, 1996, p.21.

Second, the editor committed to the advancement of all sorts of non-traditional paradigms may be tempted to accept work simply because it is different. Donmoyer suggests a third alternative that "neither thoughtlessly dismisses non-traditional forms or scholarship and scholarly discourse as 'incoherent nonsense', nor treats such work with 'indifferent superficial tolerance'".<sup>27</sup> A review process for such an alternative should not reject a paper simply because it does not conform to the standard assumptions and standard operating procedures employed in the past. All research genres are not necessarily created equal or equally deserving of representation in one of the field's major sources of legitimation. The reviewer should listen carefully:

to use ... linguistic, emotional, and cognitive imagination to grasp what is being expressed and said in "alien" traditions ... [without] either facetly assimilating what others are saying to our own categories and language ... or simply dismissing ... [it] as incoherent nonsense.<sup>28</sup>

Third, the editor may also just play a paradigm matching game to treat work within a particular paradigm with fairness. In this case, the editor would select reviewers who operate within the same paradigm as the manuscript's author.

### **Third hurdle: consideration of referees' reports by the editorial board**

Assisted by the editorial board, journal editors evaluate the referees' reports and make decisions on the fate of the papers, whether to proceed with the publication, to reject it or whether to accept the paper conditionally subject to some degree of revisions. This means that the use of referees is only one element in the decision-making process. The final decision rests within the office of the journal.<sup>29</sup> The decisions within the office are also complicated by several factors. Peer reviewer's recommendations are very often conflicting and their advice frequently contradictory. Reviewers may be prone to assume that all material pertaining to their discipline is worthy of dissemination or that no other person has ever had the correct interpretation of this material. Again depending on the academic orientation of the editor several scenarios are possible in reading a reviewer's reports:

<sup>27</sup> Donmoyer, 1996, p.22.

<sup>28</sup> R Bernstein, *The New Constitution: The Ethical-political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernist* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), pp.65-66.

<sup>29</sup> Zell, op cit, p.14.

- \* the editor may take the reviewers' voices as final.
- \* the editor may choose to separate out the reviewer's own assessment of the centrality of their own subdiscipline (we all tend to believe that our own discipline is the key to the universe); measure every revision they propose to make against the advantages of the author's original voice and presentation; weigh every phrase and sentence of the script to determine whether the author's meaning will be carried out to the intended audience, before immortalizing the manuscript in print.<sup>30</sup>
- \* When reviews are contradictory - e.g. one is very positive and one is very negative - the editor may choose to look for a third opinion before making any decision to publish or not to publish.

The dialogue going through the three stages builds on the assumption that all gatekeepers explicitly share the critical frameworks and assumptions that will enable the dialogue to transcend the disagreement in the pursuit of common objective quality arguments. As Pera puts it:

If they have the will and desire to converse, they will begin to build an overlapping area between their respective configurations ... where they can look each other in the eye and say "we both"; Thus they will set aside their reasons (for disagreeing) and look around for different ones. For example they will cite other factors, adduce other values, invoke other assumptions, etc ... The moment one interlocutor loses the debate, the other theory automatically becomes the better one, supported by winning arguments [objective arguments].<sup>31</sup>

Ideally arguments in favour or against publication of an article should be forged on the basis of an explicit and commonly-shared framework of principles and criteria.

### Conclusion

Journal publication is the finest mechanism of communication between scholars; its parameters will always be constructed, refined and validated in an ongoing dialogue by a community of scholars. However, for these parameters to be

<sup>30</sup> Harry W Gillmer, *Handbook for Editors* (Scholars Press, 1993), pp.21.22.

<sup>31</sup> M Pera, *The Discourse of Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.140.

effective, the community needs to be aware of the roots, diversity and complexity of its academic endeavour, the changing paradigms which guide their practice and their value-ladenness. The values, norms and assumptions guiding those parameters need to be explicit as the argumentation that constitutes the basis for quality control decisions.

There are no ready-made models to address the challenge. The road ahead is still to be explored. We limit ourselves to a critical engagement with the prevailing rules within the establishment. In this regard, we agree with Greenstein that "Avoiding the pitfalls of uncritical borrowing on the one hand and insularity on the other, we should continue to look for creative ways of meshing the specificity of the South African condition with the quest for universally acknowledged educational achievements".<sup>32</sup> However, as we move in this direction we must always remember as Little Richard put it: "The grass may be greener on the other side but it is as hard to cut it".<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ran Greenstein, "Education, identity and curriculum policies", op cit, p.12.

<sup>33</sup> American Rock Star, Little Richard, interviewed by D Tambo on TV show "People of the South".

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