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Scholarship as an Open Conversation: Using Open Peer Review in Library Instruction

Emily Ford

Portland State University, forder@pdx.edu

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In The Library With The Lead Pipe

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SCHOLARSHIP AS AN OPEN CONVERSATION: UTILIZING OPEN

PEER REVIEW IN INFORMATION LITERACY INSTRUCTION

In Brief:

This article explores the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy's frame, Scholarship as a Conversation. This frame asserts that information literate students have the disposition, skills, and knowledge to recognize and participate in disciplinary scholarly conversations. By investigating the peer-review process as part of scholarly conversations, this article provides a brief literature review on peer review in information literacy instruction, and argues that by using open peer review (OPR) models for teaching, library workers can allow students to gain a deeper understanding of scholarly conversations. OPR affords students the ability to begin dismantling the systemic oppression that blinded peer review and the traditional scholarly publishing system reinforce. Finally, the article offers an example classroom activity using OPR to help students enter scholarly conversations, and recognize power and oppression in scholarly publishing.

By [Emily Ford](#)

Introduction

You don't have to look far to find stories from academic authors, editors, and publishers for tales of peer review gone wrong, or very very bad. Whether it is a peer-review system that [privileges citations of works by white males over indigenous academics](#); or peer review that [misses big mistakes in research methodology](#); or even the hidden labor of peer review—peer review can be a dubious undertaking. Yet, peer review is a foundational process of scholarly communication. The gold standard for peer review in the past eighty years or so has been double-blind peer review (Shema, 2014). Double-blind peer review is a process in which neither the submitting authors nor the reviewers know one another's identities or institutional affiliations. It is review that happens in a "black box"; the entire process is hidden, even to key constituents, such as submitting authors.

Many see double-blind peer review as a way to eliminate implicit bias in review, while others argue that double-blind peer review does not adequately mask author identities and that it generally introduces a host of other problems to the peer-review process. Too, the double-blind peer-review system does not invite the curious public, students, and other members of the scholarly community to learn from others. However, there is a movement that seeks to solve some of the problems inherent in double-blind peer review: open peer review (OPR). OPR, where authors' and reviewers' identities are disclosed to one another, is a movement that attempts to address problems in double-blind review. It also seeks to address issues such as lengthy timelines between article submission, acceptance, and publication.

So what does this mean for library workers? Undergraduate students in library and college classrooms are asked to find peer-reviewed journal articles for assignments, and graduate students must frequently submit their own work to peer-

reviewed publications. Library workers answer questions about these assignments at the reference desk and discuss peer review with students in library classrooms. There is no doubt that robust discussion and debate can occur during the peer-review process, but how do scholars learn to participate according to its social norms? Who is invited in and who isn't? How are they invited in? And how are student-participants empowered to challenge those social norms?

In this article I present and frame OPR not just as a process for scholarly publishing, but also as a tool for information literacy instruction that can help library workers invite students to better understand scholarly conversations and to contribute to them. Further, I argue that by using OPR in teaching, OPR can be a mechanism to start dismantling oppressive power in the scholarly publishing system. Then I will discuss how OPR invites a broader engagement with review and scholarly conversations, and I will offer one example of utilizing OPR to invite undergraduate students to participate in this aspect of scholarly conversation.

Open Peer Review

Before we dive in and for those who are unfamiliar, I would like to address what OPR is. In essence, OPR allows for open communication between authors and referees. Names of both the reviewers and authors are known to one another. In many implementations, reviewer reports and author responses are published as supplemental material to final article versions. Some OPR journals also facilitate community review where any community member may contribute their review in addition to those of the assigned referees.¹ This mirrors what can occur on pre-print servers. It should be noted that OPR implementations are all different and are intended to serve specific communities. In STEM

there has been a move to more granularly define OPR (Ross-Hellauer, 2017) than the overarching definition that I provide here and which I have investigated in my work (Ford, 2013). In my view, however, and for the intent of this article, open communication between authors and referees is a sufficient functional definition. (For a more thorough explanation of OPR please read my short take in ACRL's [Keeping Up with... Open Peer Review](#), or learn about the OPR process at this journal in an article from 2012, [Open Ethos Publishing at Code4Lib Journal and In the Library with the Lead Pipe](#).)

There is a world of quantitative research into peer review quality, as well as OPR and its impact on research quality—mostly from the clinical, biomedical, and other STEM fields. Qualitative research on OPR in the social sciences and arts and humanities exists in much smaller quantity, partially due to the relative glacial pace at which these scholarly disciplines have investigated and experimented with openness in their publishing processes, if at all. In one presentation at the [Eighth International Congress on Peer Review](#), Sarah Parks (2017) mentioned that [their findings](#) placed use of OPR in Publons social and behavioral science journals dead last among all the disciplines. Our own field of librarianship, which champions openness and access to information, has been slow to experiment and adopt open review. To my knowledge, Lead Pipe was the first (Ford, E. & Bean, C., 2012) and remains the only LIS publication where all articles undergo an OPR process. (It should be noted that [Journal of Radical Librarianship](#) and [Journal of Creative Library Practice](#) both offer OPR as an option, but authors may also choose to undergo blinded review.)

Scholarship as Conversation

In 2016 the Association of College and Research Libraries Board of Directors adopted the [Framework for Information Literacy](#). The Framework presents six frames for information literacy: Authority is Constructed and Contextual, Information Creation as a Process, Information has Value, Research as Inquiry, Scholarship as a Conversation, and Searching as Strategic Exploration. This article discusses only one of the frames in depth, Scholarship as a Conversation. While I do mostly discuss this frame, it should be acknowledged that frames do contain some overlap. That, however, is outside the scope of this article.

Scholarship as a Conversation is a broad frame that examines learners' dispositions, behaviors, and acculturation into their selected disciplines. Students who successfully engage in this frame may participate in scholarly conversations by evaluating works in their given disciplines and will see themselves as contributors to those conversations. In academic discourse and scholarly communication, peer review plays a large and powerful role in scholarly conversations. The peer-review process is an avenue in which many scholarly conversations occur, and which has been largely ignored by the literature discussing student participation in them, both before and after the development of the Framework.

During the development of the Framework and since its official adoption, the library community has taken a great interest in it. Library workers have written and published many articles that criticize the Framework, as well as many that laud it. Too, scholars have thoughtfully approached it to offer enhancements. There even exist numerous white papers, such as the 2013 ACRL Working Group report [Intersections of the Framework and Scholarly Communication](#). However, most of the literature about this particular frame fails to deeply

examine its relationship with peer review. For example, in Nancy Foasberg's 2013 article, "From Standards to Frameworks for IL," scholarship as a conversation is broadly discussed as an example of the Framework better embracing community than did its predecessor, the Standards for Information Literacy. Foasberg asserts that Scholarship as a Conversation "...emphasizes the scholarly communities in which knowledge is produced," (p. 709), and advocates for student voices to participate in scholarly conversations. "If we understand scholarship as a conversation and research as a process of engaged inquiry, then the Framework also needs to consider students as potential participants in, rather than mere consumers of, these activities" (p. 710). Indeed, Foasberg's work points to the Framework's improvements in deeper and better acknowledgement of the social contexts in which scholarly conversations occur, but it is not in the scope of the article to offer library workers suggestions on how to implement such concepts into their instruction.

Unlike Foasberg, Julia Bauder and Catherine Rod (2016) offer a literature review to present information literacy teaching practices as they correlate to each frame. In their analysis of the frames, however, peer review is mentioned only once, and then only as it relates to Information Creation as a Process. Moreover, their discussion of Scholarship as a Conversation surfaces two notable practices, both which do not adequately address peer review. First, they present the work of Anne-Marie Deitering and Sara Jameson (2009), which focuses on freshman writing classes and students' first entrances into scholarly conversations. Next, they discuss using review articles to showcase for students the focus of disciplinary conversations. While I do not want to trivialize these important aspects of scholarly conversations and the importance of teaching students about them, I

maintain that in our current scholarly publishing system the peer-review process is one in which many scholarly conversations occur. The Library literature seems to have largely ignored this process as part of instruction. It is a process that can elucidate for students how scholarly conversations proceed and invite them to participate in those conversations.

Prior to the publishing and adoption of the Framework, Donovan and O'Donnell (2013) discussed how traditional scholarly communication paradigms limit how we can teach and engage in information literacy. Even before the ACRL Framework made salient that "...novice learners and experts at all levels can take part in the conversation, established power and authority structures may influence their ability to participate and can privilege certain voices and information" (p. 8), Donovan and O'Donnell acknowledged that learners are excluded by the traditional model of publishing, which "...enforces the authority of the academy" (p. 123). They argue, however, that "the re-situation of students with respect to academic publishing patterns is a powerful way in which to reorient student authority inwards" (p. 127). Finally, they nod to OPR, stating that "...more egalitarian modes for producing and sharing information have brought about similarly open methods of review that question traditional notions of expertise" (p. 129). Given this questioning of those notions, it is appropriate that students may have an opportunity to engage in this particular process.

Too, Andrea Baer (2013) nominally discusses models of peer review as they relate to digital scholarship (p. 115) but does not offer much of a view as to how to embrace OPR and to invite students into participate in it. Finally, Ashley Ireland (2016) briefly discusses how library instruction based in queer theory can expose power structures in a peer-review process. "Librarians who expose

the gaps that exist in peer-reviewed publishing, an industry that holds a great interest in reinforcing its dominance, would be exposing the power structures at play that reinforce the status quo” (p. 144).

So why the failure of deeply addressing peer review as part of scholarly conversations in developing dispositions for information literacy learners? It is possible that participation in peer review is more advanced than most information literacy instruction offered by library workers who teach. True, learners must be deep in their disciplines, and often even several years into their graduate studies or have completed graduate programs, before they are invited by editors to officially participate as referees for scholarly articles, books, and other content. This points to some inherent elitism of the process. But professors require students to find peer-reviewed articles and laud peer review as a marker of trustworthiness and quality. In our current era of alternative facts, engaging students in peer review may help them to think more critically about research and evidence.

Perhaps more relevant, however, is the fact that most peer-review processes happen in a black box. In addition to the blinding in peer review, there is often little transparency as to how and when editorial publishing decisions are made. If the process is opaque to the professors and instructors who must engage in it, how can they teach their students about it? I see OPR as an offering to library workers and instructors to engage students in peer review and gain a deeper understanding of it.

On Language: Diversity, Inclusion, and Social Justice

Before I dive into the next portion of this article, I need to clarify my use of language and terms. One

of my main intellectual frames is that blind review is part of and perpetuates an oppressive scholarly publishing system. I see using OPR in the classroom as a way to not only invite young scholars into an open scholarly conversation, but also as a way to invite them to help usurp peer review's role in the systemic oppression prevalent in the scholarly publishing system.

Unfortunately, dominant discourse does not use the term oppression to discuss some of these issues, but focuses on surface issues, coined "diversity and inclusion." Diversity and inclusion efforts focus on representation, celebration, and empowerment of people from all backgrounds. The folks at Simmons Libraries have succinctly outlined the differences in their [Anti-Oppression Libguide](#):

Though they go hand in hand, diversity & inclusion are not the same as anti-oppression. Diversity & Inclusion have to do with the acknowledgment, valuing, celebration, and empowerment of difference, whereas [Anti-Oppression](#) challenges the systems and systemic biases that devalue and marginalize difference. Diversity & Inclusion and Anti-Oppression are all necessary in order to work toward equity and justice. (Simmons Libraries, 2018)

In this article, my use of the words diversity and inclusion refers to representation of all people and empowerment of all people, respectively. These are the terms that our institutions use, and the terms used by ACRL, which recently [adopted equity, diversity, and inclusion as a "signature initiative" into its plan for Excellence](#). In addition, when I use these terms I also see them as growing the possibility to further anti-oppression by challenging and eventually dismantling the current peer-review system.

I should also note that the term social justice is, to me, aligned with anti-oppression. It is a term that I see more widely used by our field than the term anti-oppression. For this article I have chosen to use the terms diversity, inclusion, and social justice.

Diversity and Social Justice in Scholarly Communication

Scholarly conversations happen at conferences and in publications. The process of peer review, occurring most often prior to the publication of works, is a large part of that conversation. And most often that part of the conversation occurs behind a layer of opacity. Moreover, the people who wield the power of what conversations are recorded and represented are varied, but in journal publishing, editors, editorial boards, and peer reviewers wield a lot of that power. So who are the editors, publishers, reviewers, and editorial board members? One can make some assumptions, but there has been little data collected in this regard.

The demographic majority of publishers are white (Greco, et al, 2015), and there is a lack of published data as to the diverse make up of peer reviewers.² One could assume, however, that the pool of peer reviewers—largely from the academy—reflects faculty and scholarly publisher demographics, which are majority white (Roh, 2016a). Charlotte Roh lays out evidence of bias created by privilege and points out that “...one possible consequence is a feedback loop in scholarship that privileges and publishes the majority voice, which is often white and male” (2016b, p. 82). In short, one well-grounded assumption is that the scholarly publishing environment does a poor job including the voices of people of color, transgender and queer people, women, and other marginalized folks—voices that are not able to be heard because they are oppressed by the loudness or pervasiveness of the voices from a dominant

group. Charlotte Roh, Emily Drabinski, and Harrison W. Inefuku (2015) argue that scholarly communication can be a mechanism to shrink the equity gap and move toward a more socially just scholarly publishing system. Among other factors, I see changes in peer review to be integral to this effort (Ford, 2017).

The fact of the matter is that scholarly conversations are ruled by the tradition of double-blind peer review, but also by the majority—white—voice. The majority voice, then, becomes amplified and stifles minority voices. I would go so far as to say that in many cases scholarly conversations reflect elitism, classism, misogyny, and racism. For college students whose demographics are increasingly diverse and not reflective of the demographics of academic faculty and publishers,³ the double-blind peer-review system does not offer them a place.

Diversity and Social Justice in Information Literacy Instruction

Critical information literacy is an approach to information literacy that is well-suited to attend to issues of social power, social exclusion, and social justice in information literacy instruction. Because library workers using a critical information literacy approach ask students to position themselves to question existing power structures of information creation, representation, access, and delivery, it is well aligned with a worldview that embraces diversity and works toward dismantling systems of power. Several of the scholars whose works I have already cited show this disposition. There is not yet a large body of literature that explicitly discusses the ACRL Framework and its relation to diversity and social justice. However, the 2017 article by Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins, “Reorienting an Information Literacy Program toward Social Justice: Mapping the Core Values of Librarianship

to the ACRL Framework” relates Scholarship as a Conversation directly to ACRL’s core value of diversity. In the article they develop learning outcomes that reflect their mapping exercise. For Scholarship as a Conversation, their outcomes are: “develop familiarity with modes of discourse in order to join conversations and circumvent systems of privilege;” and “resist normative structures that privilege certain voices and information over others by engaging in inclusive citation practices” (p. 54).

Finally, some instances of OPR can include community review in addition to formally appointed reviewers. In these instances, peer reviews could be considered user-generated content, which Maura Seale (2010) asserts “...can offer a challenge to dominant and mainstream discourse by introducing words and perspectives of individuals who would otherwise not be heard” (p. 230). Further, Seale succinctly affirms that user-generated content can allow students to begin critically questioning “traditional and authoritative sources of information” (p. 230) and via its dissemination “...can contrast and thus expose the otherwise invisible infrastructures of dominant forms of knowledge production, including whose voices and perspectives they validate, and those they do not” (p. 230). With some implementations of OPR, which allow public or community peer reviews, the possibility exists for this to occur.

So how can we invite marginalized voices into scholarly conversations and amplify those voices? How can we get students to meet those outcomes articulated by Lua and Higgins? As a library worker who provides instruction, I see this coalescence of the framework and work toward social justice in scholarly publishing as an opportunity to crack open the scholarly communication paradigm. The students with whom we work are going to be the people who continue scholarly conversations in the

future. I embrace the assertion that “Librarians must be proactive in breaking from the paradigms of scholarly communication as it is currently taught” (Donovan & O’Donnell, p. 123).

Case Study

In this section of the article, I offer an experience that I hope will provide an example of inspiration of how to integrate OPR in the information literacy classroom.

It’s not that I don’t value the Framework for information instruction, but my day-to-day reality is that I can usually only touch on one or two concepts in any given instruction session. Moreover, I have to balance my relationship with faculty and their openness to my pedagogical style.⁴ While this usually does not inhibit me all too much, it is rare that I am able to engage in critical pedagogical aims for the entirety of an instruction session. All too frequently Scholarship as a Conversation and inviting students to become part of the conversation is further down my priority list than ensuring that students can succeed on their assignments to find 5 peer-reviewed articles for their annotated bibliography, which must be completed with proper APA citation formatting. And as most library workers providing instruction are probably aware, these outcomes can only be accomplished once students understand what is an annotated bibliography. The more ambitious outcome to have students frame their own ideas and participate in scholarly conversations is apt to get lost in the machinations of understanding an assignment, using effective keyword search strategies, choosing appropriate resources and databases to search, evaluating and selecting search results, and all of the other skills students need.

In the Fall of 2016 I was approached by a faculty member to develop and deliver a library instruction session to two cohorts of BUILD EXITO Scholars in Winter 2017. [BUILD EXITO](#) is an National Institutes of Health-funded program that provides undergraduate students education, training, and the support they need on their way to becoming scientific researchers. One of its major goals is to support students from underrepresented groups who are working toward a career in the bench and life sciences. One thing I find particularly compelling about this program, is that student participants are referred to as scholars. This simple change of language, which is taken seriously by all involved, signals for students that they are already part of a research community—part of a scholarly conversation. The program supports participating scholars throughout their higher education path, beginning with their first courses at community colleges, through transferring to a four-year institution, and their application for graduate studies. The program offers an integrated curriculum, peer and career mentorship, and research experiences via assistantships and research learning communities, all in a supportive environment. BUILD EXITO scholars come to Portland State from local community colleges, but also from all over the United States. Many scholars in the program also come from American territories such as Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Marianas islands. These scholars, in addition to their racial and ethnic diversity, are frequently also first-generation college students.

When discussing with the faculty member the goals and outcomes for an instruction session, it became clear to me that this session would be different than any other I had taught. Of course building critical thinking in research was one goal, but BUILD EXITO operates with a worldview that acknowledges power differentials and disparities in academic research, with the aim of developing

scientific researchers who can work to dismantle and reshape power structures so that they become more diverse and inclusive. My view of higher education and information literacy instruction follows in the same vein, and here I was presented with an opportunity to dive deep with that lens! But it was also new for me and a little intimidating. Although I grew up a religious minority (ethnically Jewish in Oklahoma), I have walked through the world with race, class, cisgender, and education privilege. Would this lens coming from someone like me make sense with this group? I was excited to work on expanding my skills as one who helps to facilitate learning and critical thinking. Too, my research and knowledge of OPR, which I see as a mechanism that enables authors and publishers to work toward ameliorating harmful power structures in the academy and scholarly communication, seemed to nicely dovetail into this session's focus. Finally, I felt like I would really be able to use OPR in the classroom and dive deeper into Scholarship as a Conversation than before. This two-hour library instruction session was part of these students' required extra mentoring/workshop during the term. The first forty-five minutes of the session was spent on discussing keyword search strategies, exploring the library's catalog system, and generally focused on reviewing library systems and search techniques—all with a critical lens. Then, we used the rest of the session to explore peer review.

At the outset of our time together I asked students what they knew about peer review. Although they reported having already had many conversations about peer review in their orientation to the program (at which I presented), during their mandatory workshops, and in their for-credit courses, it was clear to me that they still viewed it as a mystical process. In order to more clearly show students the peer-review process, I had students look at a pre-selected open peer-reviewed article

and its review process from [F1000Research](#). I asked the scholars to read the article abstract, and then to read certain portions of the referee comments and author responses to them. After the scholars had read through the materials, I gave them a series of questions to discuss in small groups. Those questions were:

- Why did the reviewers respond as they did?
- How did the authors respond to reviewer comments?
- How did reviewer's respond to the revised article?
- From observing this, what you have learned about the peer-review process?

Our conversation based on the article was pretty good, but it was clear that there was still a bit of a disconnect for students. They weren't wholly familiar with the research and concepts at hand. But the activity did not end there. We then moved into a more deliberate, authentic, and "hands-on" approach, which I developed with inspiration from an activity from an [Open Peer Review Workshop](#) at the 2016 [FORCE II Conference](#). Each table of scholars received a print-out of a tweet about climate change ([tweet 1](#), [tweet 2](#), [tweet 3](#)), which I selected because of the evidence offered in each of them. The students' task was to peer review the tweet. And wow, did they go all out. The room was full of energy, and the previously dull and quieter tone in the room became noisy and vibrant. After the scholars worked in their groups, we reconvened for discussion. I asked them: what was your peer review? What was your process? What came up for you? Did you have any emotions about it?

With this activity I witnessed students moving from semi-engagement with the on-paper peer-review exercise, to being excited and confident to contribute their knowledge to a conversation. They were reviewing the works of experts and gaining a

deeper understanding of peer review in the process. In my view, it also opened for students the possibility for them to have agency and power to embrace mechanisms that are currently challenging the scholarly communication system status quo.

Most of the information I gleaned from a closing student assessment showed that the OPR exercises were the most impactful for students. One student stated that they learned that “the peer-review process has ‘steps,’ I hadn’t seen the process before.” Too, several students articulated that the activity excited them and they wanted to learn even more about peer review. “I learned so much about the peer-review process and am fascinated. I would love to learn more,” and “[I] learned about the editorial process. [I] really appreciated the peer review conversations we had.”

Certainly there are things I would do differently if I have the opportunity to use these exercises again. First and foremost, I would better tailor the reading and text-heavy portion of the exercise, and if possible, I would flip this portion of the session (for reading to be completed prior to our session). This would allow more time for peer reviewing tweets and discussing the experience, especially since this portion of the class was the most engaging, fun, and what the instructors and students enjoyed the most. Next, I would spend more time to find tweets from a more diverse group of experts. It is embarrassing to admit that all of the tweets we reviewed were from the white male majority, though not for lack of trying. (I was surprised by how much time I spent on identifying these tweets, attempting to find diverse representation, and even then I failed.)

Conclusion

One of the ways we can help students engage in Scholarship as a Conversation is to engage in instructional practices that embrace advances in scholarly communication that allow for greater inclusion and a diversity of voices. OPR is one such practice. With most scholarly conversations guarded by an opaque peer-review process, it can be challenging to demonstrate how this “gate-keeping” process works. (This process is also racist, misogynist, elitist, and classist.) By providing transparency in peer review, we are making space for queer and trans voices, voices of people color, and the voices of other marginalized people to participate in scholarly conversations. We are also inviting students to see its “nuts and bolt” so that they, too, can participate in and work towards improving the system.

While it can be hard to engage in deep exploration of peer review in any given instruction session, exploring OPR may be well worth your while. In addition to it transparently showing students the process, it can be fertile ground to further invite students to participate in scholarly conversations. Class activities that engage with OPR can start to uncover peer review’s mechanics and invite students to begin dismantling the oppressive system of blind review by engaging in open scholarly conversations. With diversity, inclusion, and social justice work the scholarly communication system can be re-invented so that it supports and reflects all researchers.

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1. See [F1000Research](#) and [Atmospheric Chemistry & Physics](#) for examples. [The Role and Responsibility of Peer Review. [Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2016 [

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