

Reminiscences / Herinneringe

Working as the editor-in-chief of *Historia*, circa 2011–2015: a self-study

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Introduction

In late 2010 I became the editor-in-chief of *Historia*, the journal of the Historical Association of South Africa (HASA). Along with my co-editors I have overseen the publication of nine editions of *Historia*, starting with the May 2011 edition (Volume 56, No. 1) and ending with the May 2015 edition (Volume 60, No. 1). Against this background the purpose of this reminiscences piece was to revisit and then reflect upon how I have engaged with subjectively selected critical editorial incidents I have encountered during my tenure. Naturally I could not deal with all incidents and have selected four that I present below. These were chosen because on reflection they quite simply were the ones that stood out.

This reminiscences piece was done by means of a self-study which can be described as the study of one's self, one's actions, one's ideas, as well as the "not-self". In the 1980s teachers and academics began to use biographical forms of inquiry, as well as personal histories and experiences, to gain a better understanding of their practice.¹ The aim was to use their experiences as a resource for their research and to "problematise their selves in their practice situations" with the goal of reframing their beliefs, understandings and practices so as to improve upon them.² Self-study is not done in isolation but requires collaboration for building new understandings through dialogue. A self-study is therefore a study of personal experience in a social context. It is improvement-aimed and it looks for, and requires evidence of, reframed thinking and transformed practice.

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1. N. Gough, "Rewording the World: Narrative and Nature after Poststructuralism", in M. Robertson, R. Lawrence and G. Heath (eds), *Experiencing the Outdoors: Enhancing Strategies for Wellbeing* (Sense Publishers, Amsterdam, 2015), pp 233–244. See also R.V. Bullough and S. Pinnegar, "Guidelines for Quality in Autobiographical Forms of self-study research", *Educational Researcher*, 30, 3, 2001, pp 13–21.
2. V.L. La Boskey, "The Methodology of Self-study and its Theoretical Underpinnings", in J.J. Loughran, M.L. Hamilton, V.K. La Boskey, V.K. Russell (eds), *International Handbook of Self-study of Teaching and Higher Education Practices* (Kluwer, Dordrecht, 2004), pp 817–869.

I have endeavoured, as per the self-study methodology employed, to explain how I have translated my interaction with the selected editorial incidents into action. As evidence for researching and analysing my editorial practice I have used the extensive e-mail correspondence between myself; my co-editors; the authors who have submitted their work to *Historia*; reviewers; and other concerned and interested parties. However, for ethical reasons I have embraced Noel Gough's idea of "faction" – that is a blend of fact and fiction. Differently put – the evidence for this piece is real but the accounts are fictional.

Working with reviewers

A first step was my engagement with the reviewers of articles submitted to *Historia*. On receiving an article for consideration via email, two initial questions needed to be answered – was the article already under review elsewhere; or had it already been published in a different journal? Most of the authors who submitted their articles provided the answers to these questions. On the odd occasion an internet search was deemed necessary to verify the assurances given. The next step was to read the article and decide if it should be sent out for review. At times I asked co-editors or members of the editorial board to assist in this process. Some articles were rejected at this level but the majority were then be prepared for the review process.³ This entailed removing all reference to the identity of the author/s and preparing the *Historia* review form. The articles were then, broadly based on historical expertise although this was not always possible, equally divided between myself and my co-editors. Attempts were also made not to have editors manage the review process of an article from their own institution. The challenge then began – finding reviewers with the necessary scholarly expertise for the double-blind peer review process.

Sometimes it was possible to identify reviewers by drawing on historians that I knew who worked in the field related to the submitted article and who would have the necessary expertise to conduct the review. These historians were invariably approached via email and asked if they would be willing to review an article. The title of the article would be stated in the email. If the identified reviewer agreed, the article and the review form were forwarded to him/her. In the original email the aspirant reviewer was also asked whether, in the case of them being unable to review the article, they could recommend possible alternative reviewers. This proved, for the most part, to be a sound way of finding reviewers. However, on a regular basis articles were received which were completely outside of my frame of reference. Then consultation with my co-editors and the scholarly databases on the internet proved exceedingly helpful in identifying both local and international reviewers. However, searching for reviewers proved to be a time consuming undertaking because it meant endless internet trawling in search of suitable reviewers with contactable details.

3. On occasion articles addressed to *Historia* on engineering, architecture, religion and so forth arrived in my inbox. These articles were almost exclusively submitted by non-historians who clearly paid little attention to *Historia*'s position: "The editor-in-chief invites the submission of original, previously unpublished research on aspects of southern African history, methodology, historiography, as well as reviews and review articles." These articles were invariably rejected at desktop level.

Finding suitable reviewers who declared their willingness to review an article proved to be but half the battle. The next step was emailing the article and the review form to the reviewer. Initially I was very generous and allowed reviewers up to 12 weeks to complete the review process. I usually sent a reminder via email after 10 weeks. My reasoning in providing so much time was simple: reviewers were doing *Historia* a favour by sacrificing their academic time to engage intellectually with an article, without any financial gain, to arrive at a subjective judgement. What I realised very soon was that the more time I gave reviewers the more time they took to complete the review process. My co-editors also pointed this out to me very early on. This was also confirmed in conversations with other journal editors. Based on these interactions I adjusted the time available to reviewers and gave them 4-8 weeks to complete the review process. Shortening the time reviewers had to complete the review process led to far better results. But many a time reviewers agreed to review an article but balked at the 4-8 week timeframe given to them. In such instances I was more than happy to negotiate turnaround times.

However, some reviewers, after initially agreeing to review an article within the given timeframe, simply fell silent for months on end. In such instances I would send email prompts. Many a time my reminders met with fresh promises of “next week” or simply ongoing silence. In extreme cases, articles had to be reassigned to new reviewers because the original reviewer had completely disappeared. The consequence was that in some instances as many as six reviewers at various times agreed to review a certain article – with only two eventually delivering. On reflection I came to realise that I had very limited power over the timeframes associated with the review process. I was reliant on the goodwill of fellow historians and had to compete for their time.

Alongside time, the steepest learning curve related to coaxing useable reviews out of reviewers. Articles were on occasion accepted or rejected in two cryptic sentences which gave me very little scope for feedback for the author/s of the submitted article. In other instances an article would merely be “marked” by means of track changes as if it were a student assignment. I quickly learnt that to seek further clarification or a more substantial report based on the *Historia* review form was problematic because reviewers argued that they had already done what they could. The nett result was that an additional reviewer had to be approached.

The majority of reviewers were, however, highly professional and performed commendable voluntary service in the turnaround time available to them. They took the intellectual engagement with the work of their peers seriously. The detailed reviews submitted forced me to engage with myself, my ideas and my actions and most importantly with the “not self”. In the process I was immensely enriched by the reviewers’ comments who many a time forced me to reframe my position. Engaging with the reviewers’ reports was in many ways a gratis form of re-education. At the same time I met, virtually for the most part, historians that I otherwise would not have had contact with.

Dealing with authors whose articles were found unsuitable for publication

Once both reviewers had submitted their reports I invariably compiled a coordinating report to be forwarded to the author/s who had entrusted *Historia* with their intellectual endeavour. On occasion, exceedingly harsh and personal comments were edited out. For the most part the double-blind review process was allowed to speak for itself and I merely highlighted issues of concern that the authors had to engage with. The most challenging aspect was to communicate reports to authors whose submissions had been found unsuitable for publication. At the start of my tenure as editor-in-chief, I developed a very officious letter with the HASA/*Historia* logo and my editorial address on it. I also crafted a very sterile inoffensive (at least that was what I thought) message informing the author that his/her article has been found unsuitable for publication. I avoided words such as “rejected”. With my electronic signature in place the letter, along with my coordinating report, was forwarded as email attachments. In the content/subject box I merely stated: *Historia* article. The email itself contained the following cryptic message:

Dear Author,

With reference to your article submitted to *Historia*, kindly see the attached documents.

Yours

Johan Wassermann.

I argued that by keeping it cold, clinical and impersonal would be the least painful and inoffensive manner for both the author/s and myself to deal with the matter. At the same time I rationalised that a very official rejection letter would save time and help me skirt the responsibility of rebuffing someone else. Quite simply, I argued that rejecting an article, although the reasons as stated in my coordinating report might differ, was a “one size fits all” scenario.

Soon after sending out several such rejection communications I started becoming somewhat uncomfortable with the officious and bureaucratic manner in which I was engaging with authors whose work was found wanting by the reviewers. A turning point was reached when I received a rejection letter that adopted a similar tone and was written in a similar style. I have previously received rejections communicated in this manner but now I was suddenly both a sender and a recipient. I came to acknowledge my own resentment in receiving rejection letters of this nature. This proved to be an “aha” moment, and I decided to change my approach. I was after all engaging with fellow historians, colleagues I would quite possibly have to engage with in the future at various conferences and workshops. But more importantly, I argued, they probably felt the same resentment I had experienced, not necessarily for having an article rejected – but the way in which it was communicated.

At first tentatively, but in time with more confidence I began to write more personal, remedial orientated rejection emails. I attempted to craft my rejection email based on the feedback of the reviewers; I foreground the intellectual reasons

for the editorial decision. Regardless of whether the submission had been rejected outright, or could be resubmitted after addressing the extensive changes expected by the reviewers, I tried to write a personalised email to accompany the final report. In changing my practice in this manner I felt better in myself and I must admit, over time I became more “battle hardened” at conveying messages of rejection.

Invariably I always hoped that my rejection letters (both the impersonal and personal versions) would be received in a collegial spirit. I always asked authors to acknowledge my correspondence by means of a return email. However, authors responding to a rejection email proved to be the exception rather than the rule. Indeed, for the most part rejections were greeted by stony silence. The exception to the rule was the odd gracious return email expressing gratitude towards *Historia* for entertaining the article and expressing understating (and sometimes even sympathy) for the duties that I had to perform as editor-in-chief. What was, however, more common were email and sometimes telephonic exchanges with authors whose articles were rejected. For the most part these post-rejection exchanges centred either on historiographical or on what, over time, I and the other editors termed “salami making” issues. In terms of the former, “What is History?” proved to be a thorny debate. Some reviewers took serious issue with what they regarded as Sociology, or Psychology, or Political Science. Others had a more interdisciplinary stance towards what constituted a body of knowledge or discipline. Engaging in debates with authors whose work was pigeonholed outside of the discipline of History by reviewers, proved particularly taxing. With reference to “salami slicing”, this applied to articles on a historical event or figure which were taken and then divided into minute timeframes and each frame presented in some detail in a de-contextualised but well-crafted piece. The other slices were invariably tracked down to other journals.

What proved the most challenging was to learn how to deal with authors whose articles were rejected and who demanded to know the identity of the reviewers or who accused the reviewers, who were not known to them, of “knowing nothing about the topic anyway”. It took me some time to learn not to take such outbursts personally and to merely reiterate, when reason was supplanted by emotions, the fact that the “double blind” peer review process is binding and that the editorial decision is final and not open for endless debate or demands of arbitration by extending the review process.

Journaling with “powerful” professors

An email comment from one of the co-editors that she had “taken one for the team”, proved to be the kernel for the editorial experiences that make up the next subsection of my reminiscences. The comment became less oblique after I began to read through my email exchanges with authors. I began to realise that I had also had a range of experiences with those who could be loosely defined as “powerful professors”; this correspondence forced me to reflect upon myself, my actions and my ideas as an editor-in-chief. I was also, in the process, forced to reflect on the “not self”. Some of these examples are presented in the form of dialogues, altered for the purposes of this piece.

Experience 1:

Professor A:

Dear Johan,

Attached find my article. I have also attached the names and contact details of Professors B and C. They are experts in the field and are suitable reviewers for my article.

All the best, Professor A

Johan:

Dear John (I felt confident enough to address him by his first name),

Thank you for your submission. *Historia* subscribes to a double-blind peer review process. Therefore I have to discount the proposed reviewers in favour of independently appointed ones.

All the best, Johan (A subsequent desktop search confirmed that neither Professor B nor Professor C had any expertise in the topic.)

Several months later ...

Johan:

Dear John,

Attached please find the reviewers comments on your article. They have suggested substantial changes. See the attached report.

All the best, Johan

Professor A:

Dear Johan,

Thank you, but I am too busy to consider these changes.

All the best, Professor A

Experience 2:

Johan:

Dear Professor D,

Attached please find the reviewers' comments on your article. Your article has been accepted for publication on condition that you engage critically with the comments made by the second reviewer. See the attached report.

All the best, Johan

Professor D:

Dear Johan,

Who does this person think he/she is? Your journal is anyway only for school teachers. Are you now trying to compete with the *South African Historical Journal*?

I withdraw my article.

Best, Professor D

Johan:

Dear Johan, Avoid Professor D.

Best, Johan

Experience 3:

Professor B:
Dear Johan,
Attached find my article for consideration.
All the best, Professor B

Professor D: (I could not avoid him as he is an expert in his field).
Dear Johan,
This article is not suited for publication and will never be. Please tell the author to stop working in this field.
Best, Professor D

Johan:
Dear Professor B,
Attached find the reviewers' comments on your article. The verdict is that it is unsuitable for publication.
All the best, Johan (The harsh comments were reworked into a more palatable version in the co-ordinating report)

Professor B:
Dear Johan,
Thank you. Next time I will write in another language which I am sure will find more favour with the reviewers.
All the best, Professor B (The article in question later appeared in an international journal in its original format)

Experience 4:

Professor E:
Dear Johan, Attached find my article for consideration by *Historia*.
Best, Professor E

Johan:
Dear Professor E,
Attached find the reviewers comments. Your article is very descriptive and needs to be more analytical; it is overlong and the images are generally cosmetic in nature. If you address these aspects your article would be published.
All the best, Johan

Professor E:
Johan (no niceties) Nobody can change anybody else's work. My article will remain as is.
Best, Professor E

Johan:
Dear Professor E,
We are bound by accepted procedures for accredited academic journals and your failure to comply will mean that we cannot publish your article.
Best, Johan

Professor E:

Dear Johan,

I have made the changes but still do not agree. I have left the images in.

Best, Professor E (I subsequently used my editorial prerogative to remove the images and was given the silent treatment for a year)

From my present vantage point the experiences as presented above may look almost humorous in nature but that would be to mask powerful struggles taking place in academic scholarship. These experiences did make me reflect on my practices as an author and in some ways served to entrench certain practices such as honouring the double-blind review process. But I also became much more circumspect when dealing with certain “powerful” professors.

***Historia* as examiner and critical friend**

Between late 2010 and early 2015 a trend, in my view at least, began to develop which I deem worthy of including in this self-study. *Historia*, like all other academic journals, is increasingly being expected to partake in the examination process of doctoral students from certain South African universities.

This might sound like a very odd claim to make, but the nuts and bolts are as follows: Certain South African universities expect students (supported by their supervisors) to submit an article gleaned from his/her (as yet unfinished) doctoral thesis to an accredited journal. It appears to be a requirement for the student to graduate and for the supervisor to receive his/her productivity units. What transpires after submission of the article to the journal differs from university to university. For some institutions a letter from the editor-in-chief of the journal indicating that the article has been received on a certain date from a doctoral candidate (whether published or rejected seems inconsequential) is the key element. Such letters must then, along with the doctoral thesis, be submitted as part of the examination process.

What became clear in some of these instances was that the concern was not whether the article would eventually be published (or for that matter whether it was actually publishable from the outset) but that a suitable letter had to be received in exchange for submitting an article. The point was unmistakable – it was the letter which held the real currency in an administrative process that had to be completed; it did not necessarily reflect the scholarly quality of the academic work. I must hasten to point out that not all emerging historians working towards a doctorate, even those from universities that subscribe to the process outlined above, are guilty of submitting sub-standard articles as part of an examination process.

How did this impact on *Historia*? Unrefined articles arrived from doctoral candidates in history and its sister disciplines. Some of the articles were easy to deal with and were rejected at desktop level for being academically unacceptable or not adhering to the focus of *Historia*. But a substantial number left enough doubt in my mind for them to be entertained. These articles were then entered into the system to be reviewed, adding to the pressure placed on reviewers. The articles

entering the system would in most instances receive the utmost care from academic historians.

Drawing on the documentation created during my tenure as editor-in-chief a clear pattern emerged. Many of the articles from doctoral students were rejected by the reviewers. However, many a time the rejections would be accompanied by detailed comments on how the article could be improved upon for re-submission. In time I came to understand that the detailed comments, a secondary by-product, ended up serving other purposes – that of improving the thesis or the chapter/s the submitted article had been gleaned from. In such instances *Historia* was in fact acting in a developmental manner as a critical reader for doctoral work. In all of this, one specific incident stands out above all the rest. I was telephoned and spent the best part of an hour explaining and clarifying the reviewers' comments to the doctoral student – only to never hear from her again.

From my side I had to engage with all these submissions and regularly had to wrestle with how to proceed when questions such as: "Is this a serious submission or merely done for the letter?"; or "Why does this read like a chapter rather than an article?"; or "Must I ask the author to develop the article further before sending it out for reviewing?" Thinking back on my time as editor-in-chief I must admit I could not comfortably make the distinction between serious young historians in need of development and mere letter seekers. For the most part I erred on the side of caution and probably sent out for review some articles that could have been rejected at desktop level. But then again, my institution also subscribes to the practice of expecting "a letter" and some doctoral students of mine are part of a similar process. This left me feeling very ambivalent.

Conclusion

So, what did I learn from the four incidents I chose to focus upon in my reminiscences of an editor-in-chief of *Historia*? Firstly, journal editing is shrouded in ambiguity for while any particular decision, like for example the rejection of an article, may seem singular in intent and meaning it is invariably multi-layered, multi-dimensional and multi-relational and it can therefore be interpreted in a variety of ways.⁴ The implications are that the "self-in-action" as editor-in-chief has to constantly be held up to the mirror of critique so as to determine if the model employed has succeeded or fallen down. Furthermore, how it can be improved upon? What I also learnt was that being a journal editor implies endless intersecting cycles of learning and unlearning about the self, fellow historians, history, history writing, intellectual projects, my own power and that of others, subjective judgements ... and much more. Lastly, journals have been an integral part of I knowledge production for at least the past 350 years. And yet we know very little of the role of editors who oversee the publication of these journals simply because the work done by them might be regarded as a "unitary thing". This is far from the truth because academic journals, even sometimes within the same discipline, have dissimilar priorities and these priorities are often strongly influenced by the work of the editors.⁵ Hopefully, in some small way my

4. M. van Manen, "On the Epistemology of Reflective Practice", *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 1, 1, 1995, pp 33–50.

5. A. Geilas, *The Guardian*, 4 April 2015.

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reminiscences on my tenure as editor-in-chief of *Historia* will allow some access into the inner sanctum of the secret garden of journal editing. In conducting this self-study I found new corners in my own secret editorial garden.