"THIS PAPER IS NOT IN THE CONFERENCE TEMPLATE": THE DISCOURSE OF CONFERENCE GATEKEEPING

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This paper is a call for research in a neglected area of construction management, namely the quality assessment of submitted papers aka the review process. Using a text analytical lens, we examine two interrelated gatekeeping genres: the instruction to reviewers and reviewer comments in the ARCOM chain of genres. All the reviewer comments from one ARCOM conference have been collected and analysed. The findings of this study will provide some insights into the review process. Gatekeeping genres play a major role in the shaping of a discipline's epistemology, it is therefore important that they too be subjected to scrutiny. Since many of these texts are occluded they remain under-researched. This in turn limits possibilities for disciplinary reflexivity, which is where we see this paper's contribution.

Keywords: ARCOM, conference genre chain, disciplinary practice, discourse, instruction to reviewers, review reports.

INTRODUCTION

Peer review has been an integral part of academic scholarship ever since its introduction in the mid 17th century by the first editor of the *Philosophical Transaction of the Royal Society* (Kronik, 1990; Räisänen, 1999). Today, in all the academic disciplines, peer review is the established norm for judging the quality and credibility of scientific work such as: articles submitted for publication in the scientific journals of academic disciplines (Merton and Zuckerman, 1973; Hames, 2007), proposals for research funding (Bence and Oppenheim, 2003), candidatures for academic promotion (Glick *et al.*, 2007), and papers submitted to conference forums (Räisänen, 1999). The review process is thus a critical activity for all academic disciplines; it determines the fate of innovative ideas and influences the career advancement of researchers. The peer review process therefore warrants scrutiny by the members of a disciplinary community. However, there seems to be a lack of such scrutiny within the construction management literature.

To define the peer review of research claims in terms of process, specific form, function, and style is difficult since the activity has evolved in an ad hoc manner over time, predominantly in the pure and medical sciences (e.g. Saval *et al*, 2008). Eventually it became the pure science's taken for granted disciplinary norm for assessing scientific rigor. By the, 20th century the process had become an institutionalized practice, a black box, in most scientific research-journal forums. Since the review texts are produced by a select group of community members – whose

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criteria for their own recruitment on the one hand and criteria for evaluating the research claims of their peers on the other – they remain opaque to the uninitiated.

Over the last few decades, the lack of transparency of the peer review process has generated debate and criticism among researchers, the consequence of which has been the establishment and rapid growth of "reviewing of peer review" as a new theme of academic inquiry. In, 1989 biomedicine founded an international congress on peer review on biomedical publications, which runs every 4th years and is entirely devoted to the reflexive scrutiny of the field's own editorial and peer review practices. Currently there is an ongoing debate among management scholars triggered by Bedeian *et al.*'s (2007/2009) critique of the review board performance of the *Academy of Management Journal* (cf. special issue of *Organizational research Methods*, 2009 12(2)).

While most of the concerns in the "reviewing of review process" literature focuses on issues of inter-reviewer agreement and factors related to publication judgment (Petty *et al.*, 1999, Bence and Oppenheim, 2004, Vechio, 2006, Bedeian *et al.*, 2009), less attention has been paid to the review process as social and discursive practice. What, for example, are the implications of this institutionalized norm for the development of a discipline's ontology, epistemology and ideology, and how may the review reports affect individual authors, especially novice authors?

Some scholars have examined the social components that shape the content of a discipline's publications and have found that reviewers do resist novel ideas, and there is bias and lack of adequate topic knowledge among reviewers (e.g. Smith, 2006; Vecchio, 2006). The review process has also been criticized for being a form of disciplinary censorship rather than a quality assurance, resulting in many authors feeling that they lose control of their claims, i.e. they submit themselves to "prostitution" and lose their voice (Bedeian, 2004; Campanario and Acedo, 2006; Casadevall and Fang, 2009). The discourse of reviews has become a cause for concern in disciplinary education and acculturation due to its Anglophone roots and dominance. Non-native speakers of English, especially novice researchers have difficulties understanding the tacit norms and social practices embedded in the reviewers' responses to their work, which has lead applied linguists to analyse the language of review reports (e.g. Gosden, 2003; Fortanet, 2008; Mungra and Weber, 2010).

As illustrated in the brief outline above, there has been a dramatic growth of research on the review process of disciplinary scientific journals, which has led to the opening of the black box of editorship and reviewing (c.f. Baruch *et al.*, 2008). The conference review process, however, still remains a neglected area of inquiry. The reason for this may be that conference practices differ widely in the different disciplines. Until the latter part of the, 20th century, academic conferences were mainly forums for presenting work-in-progress. The job of the scientific committee was to evaluate the claims in and quality of the paper proposals. Potential scientific papers were then submitted to journals for publication after the conference; this practice is still prevalent in most academic disciplines today.

However, new, hybrid fields of science and engineering, such as construction management, lacked traditional research journals with "gatekeepers of science" that ratified "information" as "public knowledge" (Ziman, 1978). Hybrid fields of applied and engineering science therefore developed conference forums to serve their needs for publication outlets by instituting a review process for conference papers. The

cornerstone of these conferences is the paper, which is published and distributed prior to the oral presentation (for a study of conferences in hybrid fields see Räisänen, 1999, 2002). In these fields, the first official publication site for novice researchers, and sometimes the only forum available for the written propagation of knowledge e.g. soft-ware development, is the conference proceedings. To improve the quality of both the research and review process of conference abstracts and papers, there is therefore a need for scrutiny of this gatekeeping process as well.

This paper hopes to spark interest in researching the review process in construction management by presenting some preliminary findings from an analysis of ARCOM conference paper review reports. First, the conference forum as a system of interrelated genres is described to frame the analysis of the discourse of reviewer reports. The paper ends with some reflections on the ARCOM review process and suggestions for improvement. This research is part of a larger project aimed at researching the review process in a number of research assessment forums, such as journal and grant application forums.

CORPUS AND METHOD OF ANALYSIS

Using a critical text analysis lens we have examined two interrelated gatekeeping genres: the instruction to reviewers and the reviewer reports from one fairly recent ARCOM conference. The corpus consists of 830 anonymous reviewer reports (including review reports on abstracts, and on first and final drafts of full conference papers). There are between 2 to 4 reports for each submission. Of these 830 reports, 200 represent 116 abstracts that were not developed into full papers. The remaining 630 reports represent 156 full papers, including their abstracts. For the purpose of this paper, only reviewer comments on first submissions of full papers were analysed in detail. Accordingly, we analysed 269 reports.

The findings reported here are based on a qualitative content analysis of the texts. A rough quantitative analysis was used to explore the frequency of certain elements in the core corpus. In focus for our interpretations were the textual messages to the authors of the submitted papers. Independent of each other, we initially coded the 269 review reports in the core corpus according to what kind of contributions the reports made to the authors' revision process. We ended up with two main categories, which we have called "constructive" and "unhelpful" contributions. Although our readings of the reports were naturally interpretative, the interrater agreement has high. For the few discrepancies that occurred, we managed to reach an agreement after a collective analysis.

Once coded, the content of the reports were further examined based on three questions: (1) how constructive was the feedback provided in the review reports? (2) what features did the reports address? and (3) what possible impact could these reports have on the authors?

CONFERENCE FORUM: ARCOM AS A CHAIN OF GENRES

For construction management, ARCOM (Association of Researchers in Construction Management) is an important annual event for the dissemination of knowledge and for individual impression management in the discipline. Originally the forum was open mainly to UK based researchers, but over the last few years it is becoming increasingly internationalized, attracting more and more non-native English speaking researchers as well as their PhD students. This is one good reason for "reviewing the reviewing process" in this forum to see how constructively reviewers cater to the

diverse categories of submitters. Another reason is the opportunity for self-reflection concerning ARCOM's current role and future possibilities of pushing the frontiers of research and innovation in construction.

As many significant conferences within a discipline, ARCOM is a site of negotiation in the process of disciplinary sense-giving and sense-making; it is a rite of passage and acculturation forum for novice researchers; it forms a vital part of a discipline's reward system; it creates a meeting ground for academia and industry; and it is a market places for exchanges of goods and favours. All these activities are carried out by means of a chain of interrelated transactional genres regulated by institutional gatekeeping milestones. For an optimal outcome in this conference forum, be it for a member of the review board or a potential or accepted conference participant, a holistic understanding of the whole chain of interrelated conference genres enables more fruitful and structured participation (Figure 1).

The interrelated chain of genres that interact and contribute to the production of a conference paper and conference presentation are shown in Figure 1. Each genre follows upon the other in a predetermined sequence, the success of most of these genres being influenced by the way they elicit or respond to the genres to which they are most closely linked. Looking at a conference paper from this perspective highlights the importance of those genres which have tended to be dismissed as mere formalities e.g. the call for abstracts and instructions to authors, which are in fact quite crucial to the success of a submission.
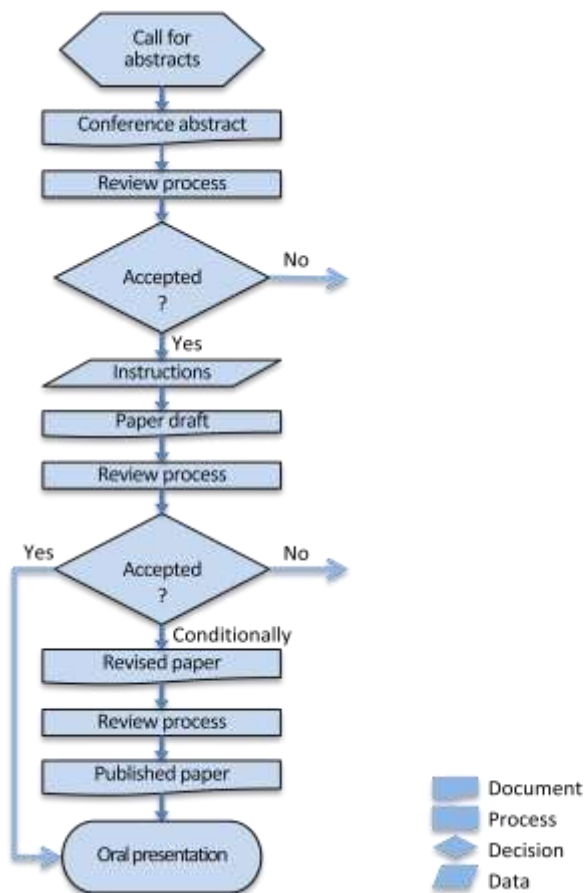

Figure 1: Chain of conference genres (Adapted from Räisänen, 1999: 112)

A conference chain can be viewed as a transaction that takes place between the conference committee and potential participants. The former sends out a needs

document stipulating the conditions for the invited offers. A submitter then offers a tender, the abstract, which, if found acceptable results in an invitation to the next round, i.e. a paper. If the abstract is rejected, the genre chain is aborted, ending in a letter of rejection from the committee.

The submissions in this genre chain are controlled by *regulatory genres*, which need to be taken into serious consideration by a potential submitter *before* the subsequent genre is produced. Regulatory genres are defined as texts or sets of texts whose main communicative aim is to define the needs and demands of the conference forum. These genres stipulate the form and content, and function as directives, e.g. "Call for abstracts", "Instructions to authors", "Reviewers' reports" and "Instructions to reviewers". However, as we shall see further on, the regulatory genres are often neglected, which in the conference chain taxes both reviewers and authors.

The *Call for abstracts/papers* consists of a standardised text sent out about eight months in advance of the conference event, establishing the thematic and temporal framework for the future conference event. It fulfils three main purposes: it informs and sells the conference, attempting to attract as many participants as possible; it also sets the standard for the submitted abstract, i.e. regulates. The Call for abstracts takes on different values for different members of the ARCOM community. For the scientific committee the document provides criteria for the decision to accept or reject a submission. For authors, it has different meanings depending on the person's familiarity with the forum. For expert members, the Call for Abstracts is a familiar genre; the news value for this category consists of the deadline dates and the geographical location of the conference. However, for those seeking entry into the field, this document takes on an entirely different force. It signals the forums implicit ideological and rhetorical conventions. These signals can be very explicit, enforcing rigid constraints on all submitters as in the case of ARCOM's explicit abstract and paper templates.

Another regulatory genre is the *Review report* to authors, which also serves as a recommendation to the conference board. One factor that strongly influences the review process and the construction of knowledge in the conference forum is the time aspect; reviewers have about one month in which to evaluate manuscripts. So although publishing in a refereed conference means rapid dissemination of novel ideas and a certain level of control in terms of technical merit, reliability of the research and relevance to the audience, the publications have a lower status than do the publications in a ranked journal. Notwithstanding, presenting papers at reviewed conferences is invaluable in a PhD student's acculturation into academic practices, and, in our view, encouraging and constructive reviews could facilitate their induction. Constructive reviews will also raise the quality of many conference papers.

In the journal forum the review process is a negotiation process between reviewers and author(s) with the editor of the journal as mediator and arbitrator (Räisänen, 1999). What is negotiated is the fit of the current research to the scope and ideology of the forum, a fit that often ends up being a compromise, at least for the author/s (Myers, 1990, Bedeian, 2004, Campanario and Acedo, 2007). Myers has also shown the strong influence this process has on the shaping of the text: the match of content to form *and* form to content. In his study of two prominent scientists' attempts to get their articles published in prestigious journals, Myers shows how reviewers formulate their criticism by focusing on the form and organisation of the text rather than on the claims themselves. Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) argue that the review-process in

the journal forum is an argumentative discussion that takes place through a sequence of generic utterances that demand both knowledge and skill from the actors involved. Both studies show that formal texts in academia are products that are socially constructed through collaborative efforts on many levels. In the final product of this procedure, the published article, all traces of this collaborative activity have been effectively masked. In turn, the masking itself is the result of the review process, and therefore to fully understand how texts are produced and consumed, authors need to be aware of the dialectics that contribute to the making of their texts.

In the conference forum, the review practice is similar albeit less vigorous much due the different context and purpose of a conference forum compared to a journal forum, the time as well as the need to cover costs. This may be one of the reasons why so little attention has been paid to the conference review process. However, in hybrid fields of applied science and engineering, where reviewed conferences are one of the most common outlets for the dissemination and consumption of knowledge, the robust review culture could be a strong driver for improvement and even innovation of a field.

ANALYSIS OF REVIEW REPORTS

The 269 review reports in the core corpus were first intuitively sorted by each researcher into two categories: "unhelpful" and "constructive" reports in answer to the first question (how constructive was the feedback in the reports?). Although there were a few differences of opinion, inter-rater agreement was high. The result of this intuitive analysis, based on our experience as authors and reviewers, was that about 3/5 of the reports, 164, did not provide constructive feedback, and would probably not contribute to an improvement of the content or the arguments presented in the respective papers (Table 1). The majority of these reports exclusively addressed surface features of the papers such as adherence to the ARCOM template (by far the most common comment in all the reports), level of proficiency of the language (lexico-grammatical flaws and spelling mistakes, the second most common comments); and the suitability of the keywords. Concerning spelling mistakes, it was remarkable how many reviewers who commented at length on spelling mistakes in the papers had a high number of spelling mistakes themselves in their reports.

Constructive reports were those that were considered to provide authors with concrete feedback on both format and content as well as concrete advice for improving the argument in the paper. Some of the most constructive reports organized the feedback using the standard disposition of academic papers: introduction, method etc. and pointing out language and format flaws last.

A deeper qualitative content analysis of the reports enabled us to distinguish linguistic features that rendered the texts "constructive" or "unhelpful" and thus answer the second question (what features did the reports address?). First we examined how and whether the reviewers addressed internal versus external validity issues. The former consists of issues pertaining to the internal validity of the paper, e.g. explication, delimitation, rigour, formulation, rationale and coherence (Savall, 2007). Most of the constructive reports addressed at least 3 of these issues (see "Content and disposition" in Table 1 and constructive example below). However, very few reports addressed the external validity of the paper, e.g. its contribution and positioning vis-à-vis the discipline. If relevance was addressed it was rather in terms of the conference forum than the field of construction management. Only one report encouraged the author/s to develop the paper into a journal article.

Table 1: Preliminary findings, analysis of core corpus. Note: These figures are approximations rather than exact percentages.

Category	No of reports	Themes				
		Format	Tone			Content & disposition
			Positive	Neutral	Negative	
"Unhelpfull"	164	65%	33%	33%	33%	33%
"Constructive"	105	65%	30%	65%	5%	95%

The third question (what possible impact could the reports have had on the authors?) was answered by examining the tone of the reviews (Table 1). Admittedly tone is a subjective quality of utterances and is highly context and individual dependent. However, there are explicit linguistic signals such as use of vocabulary, the way the message is organised and what remains unsaid. We analysed the reports separately for quality of tone and sorted them in 3 categories: positive, neutral and negative tone. As can be seen in Table 1, "constructive" reports had a predominantly neutral tone whereas "unhelpful" reports exhibited all three types: positive, neutral and negative tone. Reports that were considered to have a negative tone were those in which criticism was harsh and unmitigated i.e. face-threatening criticism as in Example 4. This kind of criticism could be destructive to a novice researcher, and confusing seeing as another reviewer was rather positive, see Example 3. What distinguished positive from negative tone in reports that were generally rather critical was the placement of the criticism. If the criticism came first, followed by neutral or positive comments, the report was perceived as having a negative tone whereas if the report started off with a positive remark this positive affect often persisted even through fairly negative feedback. We found that overall the reports seemed unnecessarily negative. There is certainly a lot more to say about tone, but for the purpose of this paper we will stop here.

Example 1. Unhelpful report:

"The paper is of some interest because of the importance of the […]. There are some minor use of English issues – another proof read is recommended. The paper does not appear to be in the ARCOM style – please check this. It is difficult to read the graphs [line types]. The style is a little journalistic and the analysis section needs some work – the interpretation involves some additional explanation. For example - section 2 at the bottom of page 6 – after the first sentence there is a lot of information about client's behaviour – does this arise from the study or is it the authors' interpretation – this needs to be clarified here and in other sections. This may mean minor alterations but it might mean the alterations are major depending on where this information has come from." (141 d)

Example 2. Constructive neutral tone:

"The author(s) critically examine the inter-relationships between values, power and performance by using case study material of university development projects. The literature review section provides a concise snapshot of the various concepts of value, power and performance. However, the methodological explanation and the presentation of findings seem weak. It would have been useful for the author(s) to provide more explanation of how they captured the observations, the role of the researchers and how they formulated the categories presented in the findings. The discussion of findings would also benefit from inclusion of some more direct quotes and/or observational data. More importantly, it would be necessary to connect the

findings more clearly back to the relatively richer review of theoretical concepts outlined earlier in the paper. There is some scope for reducing the introductory section to accommodate these further, necessary inclusions." (154 e)

Example 3. Unhelpful positive tone:

"A very interesting paper! The subject should be of great interest to the construction management society. The paper is not in the format of the conference template." (47 a)

Example 4. Unhelpful negative tone:

"The paper is poorly written. It reads like a first draft put together hurriedly by an MPhil/PhD student in the initial stages of his research degree work and submitted without perusal/approval of his research supervisor. The quality of English language expression is very poor. […] I recommend that the paper be rejected." (47 d)

An interesting point that warrants highlighting was how closely the reports adhered to the "Instruction to reviewers" despite the fact that these were not entirely coherent, see Example 5. These instructions, consisting of 9 yes/no questions, explain the foregrounding of form and language to the detriment of internal and external validity, see Example 1.

Example 5. Instructions to paper reviewers:

"Is the topic relevant to the constituent themes of the conference? Is the English satisfactory? Is the paper in the template and size appropriate (10 pages)? Does the title reflect the content and purpose of the abstract? Is the quality of illustrations, figures and tables satisfactory? Are the references representative and correct? Does the paper make a contribution to construction management research? Do the abstract keywords (for indexing) describe the content? Is this paper of sufficient quality for this conference?"

DISCUSSION AND TENTATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

To conclude our preliminary examination of the review process and reports of the ARCOM conference forum, we highlight some critical issues and uncertainties in need of clarification that the conference board and community may want to reflect upon. Clear answers of many of the questions below could lead to an enhanced review process for reviewers and authors o ARCOM papers.

- What are the specific goals of the ARCOM association and conference events, and do the regulatory genres elicit submissions that fulfil these goals?

- What are the specific intentions of the peer review process? What does the quality assurance stamp "Peer review" mean in the case of conference papers, and is it indeed a quality assurance? We have shown that the instructions to reviewers do not elicit constructive reports, which puts in doubt the ability of authors to achieve more than surface improvements. The consequence is a conference with uneven quality papers. To raise the quality of the review reports and thus that of the papers, the forum could arrange pre-conference workshops for reviewers, where these could meet and exchange experience as well as sharpen their review skills.

- The regulatory genres need to be thoroughly discussed and revised. Although there are explicit and very helpful instructions for authors, these are too long and complicated and therefore remain largely ignored. A simple suggestion here would be to simplify the template instruction and add a pop-up window at

submission asking authors if the paper follows the template and, more importantly, warning them that if the paper does not, it will be returned without review. This procedure is also an instruction, which would save both authors and reviewers valuable time to devote to the content of the paper. Another suggestion for the board is awarding a prize to the reviewer that elicits the best improvement between the first and final draft.

- Conference forums as mentioned earlier are platforms that further careers in academia. How does this implicate the review process? As most review processes, ARCOM's can also be criticised for lack of transparency and clear criteria for acceptance or rejection. Moreover, the papers are not anonymous to the reviewers while the reviewers are anonymous to the authors. What implications does this have for the language and tone of the reports, see Example 4? How does this imbalance implicate quality assurance for competing peers?

- Another important issue is the recruitment of reviewers and the implicit ethical norms that apply. For example what do reviewers do when they have insufficient knowledge of a research area or they know the author personally? Only one report in our corpus provided an aside to the editorial board, stating that he/she lacked knowledge of the topic and, therefore, would only comment on the form.

The purpose of this paper has been to initiate discussion and reflexivity concerning the assessment of research claims in the field of construction management. By critically examining the review reports of one ARCOM conference, a fair number of minor and more serious problems in the review process have been highlighted, problems that need to be addressed in order to improve the quality of the reviews, of the papers and of the research in the field. Many of these problems are due to a lack of clarity in the communication of the regulatory genres, with implications for both reviewers and authors (e.g. career advancement), as well as for the shaping of the discipline's epistemology (e.g. the fate of innovative ideas).

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