Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education
July 2025. Vol 24 (4): 49–70. doi:10.22176/act24.4.49

Making it Legible: Learning Challenges in the Closed System of Peer-Review and Editorship

Patrick Schmidt
Teachers College, Columbia University, New York (USA)

Abstract

This article contends that there is a plausible claim that peer-reviewing and editorship, two significantly impactful activities in our field—as in other disciplinary areas—function under black box approaches whereby the opacity of the process is overlaid by lacunae in learning, onboarding, and mentorship. In other words, current professional practice offers at best ad hoc and haphazard pathways to 'coming to know the process' of peer-reviewing and editorship, with little to no systematic discourse regarding adapting, disrupting, improving these processes in the many and varied sites of practice, journals and edited books. The article invites readers to consider the nature of and challenges presented by the lack of legibility and professionalization of peer-reviewing—especially within graduate education and early-career professionals—and how the field of higher music education may consider continua within which this dialogue can take place.

Keywords

Peer-review, editorship, professionalization, legibility, black-box

The peer-review process, often viewed as the cornerstone of academic rigor, presents both an opportunity and a challenge for scholars. While it serves as a mechanism for maintaining quality standards and integrity within academic publishing, its operational structures raise concerns regarding how individuals learn to participate in and contribute to this critical role. Opportunities for formal training or mentorship in peer review and editorial roles are often rare, confined to insular academic circles or professional networks, often leaving scholars to replicate models they have experienced firsthand. For many in academia, the pathway is largely shaped by the limited examples of reviews they have themselves received, establishing a learning process that may be neither comprehensive nor reflective of thoughtful, ethical, and constructive practices.

The challenges of this reality manifest in interdependent ways. Within peer-review as a system, it takes place through disciplinary practices constrained by inconsistent standards, a lack of transparency, and tacit histories shaped by established cultural norms within journal communities. At the individual level—as reviewers learn in isolation, often through trial and error or by mirroring reviews of their own work—it takes place without the benefit of intersubjective critical reflexivity, thus reinforcing the limitations of the system. The questions are not simply, *Who reviews the reviewer?* or *To whom are editors accountable?* but also and perhaps more constructively, how can our disciplinary environment facilitate legible avenues for personal learning, collective dialogue, and the overall improvement of this crucial practice?

In what follows and in conversation with colleagues in this issue, I invite the reader to consider the nature of and challenges presented by the professionalization of peer-reviewing—especially within graduate education and among early-career professionals—and how the field of higher music education may consider continua within which this dialogue can take place. Ethically, there continues to be a need to better prepare individuals for reviewer and editor roles and to ensure the ongoing development of fair, thorough, and supportive review processes. As one considers this environmentally, it seems rather symptomatic that the music education profession has a near-zero history of public discussion or published accounts regarding such significant issues and their practice—let alone a robust, visible, and systematic conceptualization and institutionalization of such a critical aspect of professional practice within graduate curricula. Pragmatically, structured reviewer development programs and agreed upon codes of conduct to improve the

Schmidt, Patrick. 2025. Making it legible: Learning challenges in the closed system of peer-review and editorship. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 24 (4): 49–70. https://doi.org/10.22176/act24.4.49

quality and professionalism of peer reviews are either difficult to access, ad hoc and highly variable, or situated within organizational/institutional disclaimer and liability culture.

A survey of issues and cases made available by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) illustrates how pervasive they are and how complex. COPE identifies the responsibilities of journal editors to support transparent and fair peer review and develops, among others, guidelines for editorial board participation (COPE 2021). Mantie and Ruthman, in the editorial to this issue, provide an analysis of COPE participation of seventeen journals in the music education field, drawing attention to gaps between adherence and on-the-ground implementation of such guidelines. Similarly, Hirst and Altman (2012) highlight the important role that journal editors and publishers must play in improving peer review. The study found that more than seventy percent of the (health) journals they surveyed were members of COPE. However, only a small percentage of journals directed reviewers to additional resources or offered robust professional engagement in the areas of reviewer ethics and constructive discursive practice. Freda et al. (2009) examine the impact of training sessions and workshops on the use of reporting guidelines, while also highlighting the role of constructive feedback in enhancing reviewers' future assessments. Ware (2011) demonstrated how greater transparency in the review process, such as publishing reviewer comments or adopting open peer review models, could enhance accountability and reduce the potential for bias. I am unaware of such practices in music education journals, nor have I experienced them in nearly twenty years of service on the boards of seven journals.

This does not mean that peer-reviewing and editorship work in music education is not professional, that is, constructed at the intersection of codified and critically understood practice, with interconnecting autonomy and accountability (Wu et al. 2017). But it raises questions as to the quality and felt experience of the *professionalization* of this practice. In other words, what is the educational responsibility of the field in onboarding members onto an essential practice space? As a systems-wide practice, it begs questions regarding contextual and historical efforts in our discipline, of gatekeeping and exclusion, of the presence and construction of critical, open, and accessible discussion across higher education and journal organizations, and the dearth of publicly available discourse. Furthermore, if *legibility*—defined as that which is widely shared, if at times disputed, as well as available and comprehensible—is a marker of professional practice, it seems reasonable to

Schmidt, Patrick. 2025. Making it legible: Learning challenges in the closed system of peer-review and editorship. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 24 (4): 49–70. https://doi.org/10.22176/act24.4.49

ask: why are few things in academic professional practice as opaque, distinctly experiential and outside the realm of the pedagogical—in the sense of not systematically taught, exemplified, and practiced as a learning space—as peer reviewing?

My interest here is to join the dialogue offered by this special issue and its editors, who rightly ask from whence this absence and why the lag within an arena this significant to higher music education. To me, it is worth querying over how legible, accessible, and coded is peer-review and editorial decision-making in the field, while centering on how professionalization (generally) takes place as one enters, navigates, and establishes oneself in the field—including how peer-reviewing has an impact on those who decide to leave or never enter higher music education. The overall concern is that the premise of professionalism in peer-reviewing and editorial work might be more assumptive than acknowledged with individual practice varying widely—from the positive to the unhealthy, from the in-depth and expert to the casual and ideological, from the welcoming and constructive to the exclusionary. Thus, and with only slight provocation, it seems reasonable to ask the extent to which and why the learning environment and the professionalization of this area of higher music education practice is both less legible than desired or assumed, baring stouter amateur characteristics than a professional practice would require.

Working at Intersections: A Small Rabbit Hole

The question of legibility makes peer-reviewing and editorship a *double-binding* space, one that is at the same time known and unknown. It is known in the sense that it is imagined as understood by those engaged in it. As reviewing is a core aspect of professional practice within any disciplinary field, it follows that it ought to be understood, clearly and widely by those therein. In fact, one might say that not only is *awareness* expected by professionals in the field, but also *dexterity*—a given and an extension of calling oneself a scholar. At the same time, these practices are unknown, in the sense that they mostly function under black box conditions—unsystematized, rarely openly to shared reflexive practice, and established by experiential histories of individuals on the few occasions when they themselves were subject to peer-review. Practices vary according to journals, to editors, to ideological or epistemological bent, and of course, to history. And yet, as I write this, the extent, feeling, and verifiability of this very claim is only partially possible, as

Schmidt, Patrick. 2025. Making it legible: Learning challenges in the closed system of peer-review and editorship. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 24 (4): 49–70. https://doi.org/10.22176/act24.4.49

there is a lack of data or research on the practice and nature of reviewing within the field of music education. I can only speak to the realities of my own experiences, my own ad hoc moments of interaction, themselves shaped by the confluence of time: the publisher or the editor at that moment, the colleagues serving as reviewers or being asked to review alongside me (and even so, only for those few journals where reviews were shared among reviewers, even if anonymized).

This double bind of known and unknown seems blind to learning and optimized for conservation. How is one to learn and grow as a reviewer? What does competence, let alone flourishing, look like in such spaces? In high-stakes environs such as those presented to reviewers—particularly those new to the role—how is one to behave in ways different from the models offered to us, as authors? As students during our doctoral education? How often do we find ourselves modulating into *Reviewer 2* territory? How often is an adversarial stance taken to be synonymous with rigor or with being accountable? In what ways and to what extent are gaps of legibility in this arena deleterious to scholarly growth and even an enabler of bias, exclusion and misuse? Thinking more modestly, it seems plausible that the lack of professionalizing structures for learning and an opaque or barely legible system is best calibrated for the calcification of practice. If that is so, when do peer-reviewing and editorship fail to be ethical practices?

The challenge to which I return is not that, in principle, these are flawed spaces; peer reviewing and editorial work are often done in principled manner, and as such they can be wondrous. Further, this work is often done selflessly[1], as a service and out of a sense of professional responsibility and duty. The challenge that animates my questions and the discussion here is that both the legibility and the classification of these two activities as professional practice are, upon closer scrutiny, more assumptive than evidentiary. The truth of peer reviewing as a 'one best system' has a functional representation that is undeniable. It works. Indeed, the promise it carries and the absence of accepted alternatives allow the skeptics (those rolling their eyes here) to dismiss criticism as unreasonable. And yet, the metonymic quality whereby the promise—the critical, constructive, insightful accountability of well executed peer-review—obscures the complex shortcomings of its enactment *should* be a greater part of our professionalizing discourse and have a greater significance in our own critical and empirical endeavors.

I think it is important to note that I am not focusing on the significant anecdotal and empirical articulation of deleterious practices themselves (Nickerson

Schmidt, Patrick. 2025. Making it legible: Learning challenges in the closed system of peer-review and editorship. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 24 (4): 49–70. https://doi.org/10.22176/act24.4.49

2005). As Ware (2011) reminds us, challenges to peer review can include but are not restricted to "poor quality reviewing, (e.g., superficial, vague, unsupported); inappropriately self-serving feedback, (e.g., attempting to increase citations to the reviewer's own work); or less frequently outright misconduct (deliberately delaying work, plagiarizing ideas, etc.)" along with general "complaints of criticism creep" whereby the reviewer requests so many detailed changes they start to become in effect a co-author" (28). Looking more broadly, naming and addressing systemic challenges, can be played down given other elements of academic life. Larson (1977), for example, emphasized "autonomy" as a central element of professional practice. This does, to some extent, allow professionals to be insulated from external control, affording them latitude over their own tasks and behavior. Perhaps contradictorily, current directives enacted by some journals might be followed in autonomous fashion by reviewers, who again, can base their work on previous personal experience or as an extension of their practice in academia. This can become self-defeating. Autonomy, while ethically and professionally meaningful, can also have an impact on the kind of 'black boxness' of other practices in academia—think for instance of the subjectivity of faculty feedback to students, a practice not widely scrutinized until seriously substandard. Efforts to extend ethical and professional learning and practice by journals alone—beyond directives or norms for better practice— might then be resisted and perceived as intrusion.

Taking ownership of my own complicity in this process, I recognize that while I have approached the dozens upon dozens of reviews I have conducted over the past twenty years with a sense of service—grounded in my own understanding of professional judgment—I also struggled to learn and navigate this black-box system. This was a trial-and-error process, evolving over time, often with unintended consequences for those who may have assumed a level of expertise, breadth of knowledge, or evaluative capacity that was not always fully developed. This was mostly solitary work, unmentored, bounded by but the minimal guidance offered by journals and editors, and most rarely, if ever, openly questioned, rebutted, reasoned with, or for that matter, recognized. In other words, there are distinctions between the epistemic truth of peer reviewing and its on-the-ground realization, whereby organizing principles are operationalized in multiple, dissimilar, non-transparent ways, making discussion, learning, and 'improvement' difficult—both philosophically and pragmatically.

Schmidt, Patrick. 2025. Making it legible: Learning challenges in the closed system of peer-review and editorship. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 24 (4): 49–70. https://doi.org/10.22176/act24.4.49

Complexity, Context, and Complicity

Before going further, I want to acknowledge the depth of the emotional and intellectual labor involved in peer review processes—be it as author, reviewer or editor—and the toll it can exact on one's life. The complexity of the enterprise is evident to anyone who has served on multiple editorial boards, led special issues, managed edited books, or served as editor for a journal. As articulated in this issue of ACT, the music education field may also find itself at a time and place where the maturity of publication venues, along with their proliferation and diversification, call for greater attention to the challenges raised here. In fact, anyone who is directly involved or paying attention is contending with and aware of the growth in article submissions, including the skyrocketing of desk-rejections, fomented by increasing international demand for publications, and now Generative Artificial Intelligence. In my own institution, we have now identified doctoral applicants submitting fake publications—with fake and professionally looking formatting, in fake but difficult to uncover journals. Simple plagiarism is starting to look like a quaint reality of simpler times.

I do not want to obscure the resounding impact of a publishing system that further intensifies the already free labor at the center of most peer-reviewing and editorships. The relational and power asymmetry between publishing houses and independent journals is more than evident, with few large for-profit corporations experiencing high profit margins while relying on the unpaid labor of scholars (e.g., Sage, Elsevier, Springer, Wiley). Larivière et al. (2015) provided an analysis of how the transition to digital publishing increased these publishers' power without translating into better compensation or support for academic labor. Perhaps most significantly, digitalization amplified the concentration of publications in the hands of a few major publishers. The shifts observed over a forty-year period (1973 to 2013) are staggering, affecting both the hard sciences and the social sciences—though to a lesser extent in the arts and humanities, where smaller publishers continue to hold meaningful market shares. Open access remains a central concern for both authors and publishers (Lupton, 2014) and features prominently in public discourse, particularly in relation to the tensions between a nineteen-billion-dollar publishing industry, copyright protections and limitations, and funding agencies advocating for broader public access to research.[2] An illuminating example was the significant lobbying force against the so called "Nelson Memo," released by the

Schmidt, Patrick. 2025. Making it legible: Learning challenges in the closed system of peer-review and editorship. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 24 (4): 49–70. https://doi.org/10.22176/act24.4.49

White House in 2022. The memo, directed at all heads of executive departments and agencies, called for "all peer-reviewed scholarly publications authored or co-authored by individuals or institutions resulting from federally funded research [be] made freely available and publicly accessible by default in agency-designated repositories without any embargo or delay after publication."[3] The subsequent failure to appropriate and enact this directive demonstrate the incredible political power of the publishing industry, which saw free and accessible availability of federally funded research as anathema to its interests.

Bringing this closer to higher education, one might again consider how the ethical and economic tensions in these and other relationships fit within broader critiques of academic labor and the neoliberal university, where productivity metrics and cost-efficiency have increasingly come to define the scholarly landscape (Allmer 2018). There are many ways to understand the environmental conditions that may facilitate the challenges here presented. Labor Process Theory, for example, emphasizes intensification, deskilling and proletarianization and their effects on education (Apple and Weiss 1986; Ozga and Lawn 1988). I believe these concepts underscore the impact of intensification and a form of deskilling that is not directly driven by external policies or mandates (as in teaching) but is instead experienced as a gradual erosion. Here, intensification and deskilling contribute to a felt flattening resulting from the ever-growing demand for article reviews, the (arguably) declining quality of submissions exacerbated by the rise of paper mills and generative AI, the scarcity of critical and supportive scholarly environments, and the overwhelming proliferation of publications. The consequence is dilution, not simply of the quality of the work, but of its value, of the time, effort and capital placed on its cultivation—including both professional development and research in the area. The demand for additional publication outputs without compensating the labor that makes them possible could indeed impact the autonomy and integrity of the research process. But does the acknowledgment of such macro realities signify the impossibility of more localized efforts? Do they fully explain their near absence?

Challenges of peer-reviewing structures and editorships and the questions of professionalization and legibility seem to be significant enough to be more present in our research, more preeminent in discussions in professional organizations, more visible in promotional criteria within higher education, and more systematically articulated within our curricula in doctoral education, leading the field to ask:

What is the role of higher education in establishing stronger discourse and practice in this area? What is the responsibility of publishers to foment and more substantially onboard and foster professional development that is meaningful? Could journals do more than posting policies and guidelines signaling ethics and accountability? What is the role of professional organizations in leveraging some of this on behalf of the profession and by which means could these be operationalized?

Professional organizations might be a particularly pertinent place to start, as they could facilitate organizing action on behalf of larger constituencies. My own personal experience while serving on the board of the International Society for Music Education (ISME) is illustrative here. While I was on the board, ISME renegotiated its contract with Sage Publishing and its production of the *International Journal of Music Education*. My perception of those negotiations clearly exemplifies the significant power imbalance articulated here, where, despite a modest effort toward re-negotiation of the contract, very little was gained: not in percentage of revenue, not in space for publication, not on open-access availability, not on resources. I recall significant pushback related to the attempt to provide greater support and space for the then *Revista* (ISME's Spanish based journal).[4] I also recall the minimal and yet not insubstantial revenue that the organization received from Sage as compensation for the journal and its importance to ISME's economic health—a significant point of leverage benefiting the large publisher. I felt a sense of powerlessness as a member of that board, as I am sure did my colleagues. On the other hand, I also failed to make an argument that more of the revenue the society received from its publication should be allocated to the work of those laboring on its behalf. Looking back, it is hard not to consider how often consequential processes and decisions within such organizations are met with capacity deficiency or amateurship. I have no knowledge of such arrangements with other large professional organizations such as the National Association for Music Education (NAfME), but I find it hard to conceive significant difference, particularly when facing behemoths such as Sage and the like. Further, I am unaware of arrangements to support editors and reviewers within NAfME and its journals that would be reasonably compatible with the revenue the organization receives from Sage for those same publications.

All of this is to say *yes*, the issue is complex. But further, the tacit lack of legibility and the *un*professional nature of this environment—unsystematized, unpaid, unaccounted—carries with it the need for greater reflection and engagement. It is

not difficult to acknowledge that those of us with years in the profession have been exploited by and benefited from the status quo. Harder is to offer a vision for the extent to which the boundaries of this work can be pushed, or to ask: to what extent a lack of imagination, of prioritization, or collective organizing are in fact shaping the hard edges of this challenge?

Ethical Incrementalism and Epistemic Ex/Inclusion

At times when one encounters demand for change in tacitly consensual spaces, the notion of heterotopias might serve as a reminder that what is constructed as common-sensical is only as valid as our capacity to imagine counter-sites and plausible contestation (Foucault 1967; Genocchio 1995). Peer-reviewing and editorship are regulated spaces where enough normative isomorphism (Wooten and Hoffman 2008) has led to uniform expectations regarding principles and general parameters of ethics, disclosure, and procedural practice—for instance, the ideal of three reviewers per article. Underneath the formal policy structure, however, remains a significant dissimilar operationalization of such notions, with significant unknown and undiscussed practices functioning outside general and public discourse.

At the heart of the argument for greater public engagement with questions of professionalism and legibility is not a call for uniformity in the soft policy structures of journal management (Jones 2009; Schmidt 2019). Rather, it is an invitation for the scholarly community to articulate the tacit and persistent aspects of peer-review discourse, challenging its prevailing "syntax." One way to frame this is by viewing peer review as a heterotopic space within the broader scholarly apparatus. Innovative processes could function as a parallax, maintaining regulation while shifting the relational distance between authors and reviewers. This shift, in turn, can create spaces where conventional social and professional dynamics are temporarily suspended— pedagogical and learning spaces that could foster new modes of scholarly engagement. Following Žižek (2006), the notion of parallax suggests that the irreducible gap between differing perspectives is not a failure of synthesis but a productive tension that reveals deeper structural conditions. Rather than seeking resolution, this dissonance itself becomes generative, exposing the ideological, epistemological, or institutional blind spots that shape our understanding. In this sense, the parallax offers a conceptual lens for pedagogy, where the coexistence of conflicting viewpoints—rather than their reconciliation—creates

a space for critical engagement, reflexivity, and transformation. Just as in peer review or academic discourse, where competing epistemologies unsettle presumed neutrality, a pedagogical approach informed by parallax resists closure, encouraging students to inhabit the space between perspectives as a site of meaning-making.

My goal here is to suggest that if we wish to ask questions such as: How does peer review both reflect and disrupt the ideals of academic rigor and equity? To what extent does it function as a space of inclusion, exclusion, and gatekeeping? When does its institutionalization privilege certain epistemologies, and how do we come to recognize this?—then we must consider the nature of the public space we construct for such discussions. If, like me, you wonder why efforts toward ethical practice and journal impact so rarely seem linked, then you may also be concerned with the scarcity of critical public reflection, exploration, and counterfactual propositions regarding the structures—assumptive, political, and policy-driven—that define peer review as a project.

It is worth noting that the issues I raise have related but broader implications in academia. For instance, several higher education institutions now formally introduce parameters for faculty search committees—and required training in/for them—where the notion of epistemic exclusion is directly cited and clearly articulated. Settles et al. (2024) define epistemic exclusion as "a form of scholarly devaluation that is rooted in disciplinary biases about the qualities of rigorous research and identity-based biases about the competence of marginalized group members" (540) and provide a lucid and current analysis of the plateauing of diversification in higher education and its potential connections to epistemic exclusion. While hiring policies have benefited from broader anti-discrimination legislation and public political pressure, their long-term impact and outcomes remain difficult to fully assess. Moreover, it is less clear—at least to me—whether the other dimension of such policies, namely epistemic inclusion, is equally prioritized in promotion and tenure procedures—another crucial peer-review process in higher education. To the arguments above, but at the individual level, the ways in which reviewers engage with these ideas—particularly in anonymized peer-review contexts—are often opaque. Identifying instances of epistemic exclusion can be particularly challenging, as doing so places a burden on the interlocutor (albeit a necessary one), and because such exclusion often operates within ostensibly neutral systems of evaluation, making it difficult to recognize and address (Settles et al. 2024).

Schmidt, Patrick. 2025. Making it legible: Learning challenges in the closed system of peer-review and editorship. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 24 (4): 49–70. https://doi.org/10.22176/act24.4.49

I argue that one can easily bring tensions delineated above to the normal business of any journal. One can look at the published history of any long-standing journal in the music education field and it would not be difficult to ascertain ideological preference or epistemic exclusion (although research here is still uncommon and often descriptive; see Yarbrough 1984). Less available is a history of rejection, or a historical archiving of tensions between peer-reviews and how they have been resolved, or the ways in which such epistemic/ethical issues have been openly discussed. In other words, how questions of ethics and journal mission intersect, and most significantly, how and when change in paradigmatic understanding tip into organizational cultural change. Editors can have a key impact here, but this space too seems to both depend on and allow for leadership to exist in a tacit environ where the expectation may be one of a significant hand in shaping direction or—at the other end of the continuum—upholding the assumptive expectations that elevated editors to their positions in the first place.

My aim is not to impugn individuals or to assign bad faith to a community that, as noted, takes service seriously and strives to do its best—often with little or no support. As articulated above, I situate myself squarely within this conundrum. My goal, however, is to demonstrate that the history of these practices—peer review and editorship—constructs what Foucault might call a *table*, a grid of understanding that (1) renders established processes acceptable, even when poorly legible; (2) burdens reviewers, particularly novices, with onboarding that is highly assumptive; and (3) establishes a general practice that is narrowly understood and sustained by minimal, if any, feedback loops.

The tacit assumption underlying this system is that scholars must inherently understand the workings of peer review—otherwise, by definition, they would not be scholars. This premise raises a deeper challenge: the organizing principles of peer review are operationalized in multiple, dissimilar, and non-transparent ways, making discussion, systematization, and meaningful improvement difficult—both philosophically and pragmatically. If there is any truth to this critique, then one must ask whether these issues function as disincentives or structural gaps that could be more effectively addressed. Are they the result of intensified labor demands and an underprofessionalized space? Or do they reflect a deeper feature of scholarly training—one that over-relies on, or overestimates, the impact and quality of its own internal mechanisms?

Schmidt, Patrick. 2025. Making it legible: Learning challenges in the closed system of peer-review and editorship. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 24 (4): 49–70. https://doi.org/10.22176/act24.4.49

I find these issues troubling, even as I recognize the challenges of determining how, in what forums, and in what constructive forms we might invite critique and discussion. As Topinka (2010) notes, "If it is true that our knowledge rests on a [tacit] operating table, if it is true that we can make sense of things only because of an underlying structural support, then removing this support or destabilizing it, as heterotopias do, would represent nothing less than an attack on our way of knowing, a direct assault upon our episteme" (62). In writing this, I am confronted with the unsettling realization that my argument may be inoperable—that the fear of disruption is simply too great, particularly in the absence of viable alternative models. And yet, the notion of flourishing remains—an ideal worth discussing, worth pursuing.

On Flourishing

Once again, and finally, I am not suggesting that individuals within organizations fail to consider pathways forward. On the contrary, many have worked—and continue to work—to professionalize peer review and make its challenges more legible.

Personally, I have twice experienced distinctive editorial practices that stood out for their intensity, responsiveness, and insight. These interactions were exceptional, emerging not from standardized processes but from a mix of personal relationships, deep commitment to an issue, and a profound sense of responsibility. I acknowledge these are hard to disambiguate. I found myself in awe of these two editors and their practice—a personal practice, mind you, that seemed to me untenable. How could they consistently devote the time, effort, and depth of engagement they extended to me across their broader editorial responsibilities? What must it have felt like to witness the learning, the unfolding insights, the consequences of such exchanges—only for these moments to remain uncaptured, illegible to the broader academic community? How could such efforts not be systematically recognized and harnessed to cultivate a flourishing scholarly community? Personally, if I am to be vulnerable, these experiences also provoked self-doubt and a sense of inadequacy regarding my own shortcomings. They were undeniably critical learning moments, yet they also underscored the very absences I have outlined here—the structural challenges that make fostering genuine intellectual flourishing within this system so precarious.

Schmidt, Patrick. 2025. Making it legible: Learning challenges in the closed system of peer-review and editorship. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 24 (4): 49–70. https://doi.org/10.22176/act24.4.49

These experiences and my ongoing work with colleagues, with doctoral students, and as an editor keep bringing me back to the Aristotelian idea of *flourishing*, which encompasses not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the development of critical thinking, self-reflection, collaboration, and the ethical orientation necessary for contributing to communal intellectual endeavors. Church and Samuelson (2016) argue that intellectual humility enables scholars to engage meaningfully with diverse perspectives, fostering not only personal growth but also the collective flourishing of intellectual communities. The challenges outlined in this section may, in part, stem from the lack of sustained public discourse and research—particularly in higher music education—on the intersections and tensions between rigor and equity, expertise and intellectual humility, or objectivity and exclusion. These tensions, often unexamined, shape the norms of peer review, editorial practice, and academic discourse in ways that merit deeper reflection.

For those who might be skeptical of the larger argument here, Krumrei-Mancuso (2014) explore how intellectual humility promotes prosocial behaviors, which in turn contribute to individual flourishing. Her research suggested that intellectually humble individuals are more likely to engage in open-minded dialogue and respect differing perspectives, both of which are vital for personal and intellectual growth. In an era of increasing political polarization and, indeed, in the often-contentious nature of scholarly discourse itself, attending to such framings may offer a constructive way forward.

There is a dual effect to my reflection on the two editor/educators mentioned above. On one hand, one ought to speak of mentorship and guidance or of emphasizing collegiality. On the other hand, perhaps greater and more careful engagement with considerations of how cultures of hypercriticism, anonymity, and inequity can dampen flourishing is also necessary. Just as significant, I believe it is worth asking how academic cultures of hypercriticism not only fail to combat anonymity-induced harshness or rejection-centered practice and positions (Squazzoni et al. 2021; Tennant et al. 2016), but themselves tacitly uphold homogenized scholastic environs.

Flourishing is definitionally incremental, and at the level of the intersection between the individual and the organization (reviewers and journal), flourishing needs not be the aim, but could be considered as a representation of good process. Aligning opportunities for flourishing with efforts toward legibility, and thus the

purposeful enactment of professionalizing spaces that value virtues such as discernment, rigor, and objectivity but also fairness, generosity, and intellectual humility, seem to me as professionally sustaining, ethical, and perhaps just as significant educative aims. If this is the case, then such a vision aligns with the stated goals of research and higher education as enterprises. Should we not, then, pursue it more vigorously and with greater consistency?

Returning to Legibility

In an effort to outline possible pathways and return to my initial aims, my first proposition is that, in the face of structural inequities, a heterotopic approach—embracing multiple, sometimes divergent pursuits—can serve as both an organizing tool and a means of mobilizing collective understanding. Put simply, the core argument of this article is that our system faces significant challenges yet we lack sustained scholarly and public professional dialogue to address them. At a minimum, I suggest that fostering such dialogue can serve as a catalyst for breaking the stasis and the assumptive comfort under which journals often operate.

I do not presume that my propositions alone carry any substantial weight; they may, on their own, be little more than theoretical musings. However, as part of a broader collective effort—an agenda shaped by concerned colleagues—they have the potential for amplification. Such an agenda might encourage deeper inquiry into journal practices within our field, spark conference sessions dedicated to these issues, and even prompt curricular changes in doctoral programs. In this way, what begins as critique might evolve into a meaningful and sustained effort toward reform.

I have argued for an expansion of the role journals and editors themselves can play, from general ethical stances to the pragmatic functioning of these organizations. A community orientation in this process might lead journal leadership in the field to discuss and collaborate on how to guide the onboarding of new reviewers—providing, for instance, anonymized examples of various past reviews—as well as discussion/dialogue among outgoing review board members.[5] I believe there is a space that is emergent from such 'educational' needs, that can serve for public dialogue about ethics and reflexive practice. This approach could be *productive* rather than merely *instrumental*—moving beyond the typical "how to publish in this journal" presentation model, toward deeper research, scholarly debate, and shared

doctoral curricula across institutions. Crucially, such efforts could be pursued using the resources already available within the field, requiring not radical restructuring but a reorientation of priorities and commitments.

Beyond collaborative efforts, broader considerations could further enrich dialogue and align with calls for greater legibility and stronger professional development. For instance, the discussion surrounding Open Peer Review in other fields (see Wolfram et al. 2020) presents compelling—if challenging—reasons to consider publishing the names of reviewers alongside articles or journal issues. At a minimum, this raises important questions about acknowledging the *tacit* labor embedded in peer review and the potential impact of such transparency on accountability. Would increased legibility encourage greater responsibility in the review process? Or might it introduce new complexities, including pressures that could shape reviewing practices in unintended ways? These are conversations worth having, particularly in a field where peer review remains largely opaque and under-theorized.

Greater exploration, including research, on impact, nature, and malleability of reporting guidelines and rubric instruments, as well as dialogue on conceptual understanding and aims of peer-reviewing itself are growing in other fields (Jefferson et al. 2002), as is the availability of de-identified, meta-data from reviews, provided by journal for external analysis. I understand these may involve an infrastructure that goes beyond the means of most journals but given what some music education organizations receive as proceedings from their journals, and the potential benefits to legibility and professional practice in the field, at least a discussion seems plausible to me.

By way of offering pathways for future discussion and inquiry, the following questions are an attempt to frame concerns for an arena of the field's professional action that could foster intellectual humility and flourishing. I hope they can also serve as an incremental starting point for public dialogue and research around issues directly pertinent and related to the enactment of peer-reviewing as a practice, as well as its professionalization and legibility:

- What is the reality of systematic and formalized learning spaces within doctoral programs in fostering and fomenting a complex and nuanced understanding, heterotopic even, of peer-reviewing processes and practices?
- What research efforts could the field map to more clearly delineate the publication and peer-reviewing landscape and its isomorphisms, particularly in the face of increasing demands and diminishing returns?

- What are the barriers to better understanding capacity building toward peer-reviewing that is rigorous but also equity-oriented and innovative?
- What research endeavors could facilitate an understanding of 'better practices' regarding the work of journals in the field?
    - In other words, how to best identify emerging policy and practice, and facilitate its critical translation across the field?
- How can organizations and professional groups/associations foment critical discourse around the questions of legibility in the peer-review process?
    - What efforts could be fomented by journals themselves toward empirical research and philosophical discussions on issues related to the ethics, economics, bias and exclusion, and professionalization of peer-reviewing (among others)?
    - What would be a reasonable threshold for availability of data from journals and their innerworkings?
- What professional development spaces could the field create for discussion, mentorship, onboarding and capacity development for both reviewers and editors?
    - Being more specific, how do we maintain but expand the *how to publish in [fill in the blank] journal* workshop model?
- What role should journals and publishers play in the onboarding of new reviewers and on the professional development of board members?
    - How to develop, communicate and foster understanding regarding systemic and accepted professionalizing practices as well as guidance to their implementation and review?
- How can the field and those in leadership organize and establish advocacy pressure toward publishers and their role in generating a more sustainable environment?
    - What role and responsibilities should national and international organizations have in this process? In its economic sustainability?
- Is it reasonable for journals to consider if not the abandonment of double-blind reviewing, at least a scholastic discussion of when and how it fails and what practices might provide corrections?
    - In what ways do lack of legibility, *un*professionalism, and/or editorial discernment play a role in limitations experienced by the double-blind standard?

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the legibility and professionalizing function of peer review and editorship within the field, raising questions about their accessibility, structure, and impact. To underscore these challenges, I invite readers to consider the extent to which systematic and formalized learning opportunities exist within professional spaces for emerging scholars and early-career researchers. I also ask

when, and through what mechanisms, these spaces fail to cultivate a complex, nuanced—even heterotopic—understanding of the peer-review process. Focusing on higher music education and the publishing landscape of academic journals, and drawing from relevant literature, I also highlight the economic constraints and labor dynamics that define this system—where peer review remains largely voluntary and unpaid. Given that publishers profit from this uncompensated intellectual labor, they bear a critical responsibility in allocating appropriate resources to support and sustain peer review as a meaningful scholarly enterprise.

Alongside my colleagues in this special issue, I seek to initiate a dialogue on how our community can systematically map, delineate, and critically engage with the current landscape of peer review and editorship—examining its isomorphic tendencies to identify opportunities for meaningful change. This is a challenging yet necessary endeavor, particularly in the face of escalating demands and diminishing returns in academic labor. By making these structures more visible and subject to critique, we can begin to envision more sustainable and equitable practices.

Given that many of us writing for this issue, and likely reading this, work in higher education, we might start by asking ourselves, using the leverage we have in our own institutional spaces and inviting our graduate students to consider how higher music education can engage more intently (seriously, systematically, educationally) in: (1) troubling the (un)sustainable labor involved in these processes and redirecting the current lack of recognition/value/status often accompanying them; (2) better integrating conceptual/ethical/pedagogical discussions regarding research practice writ large and the related practices of peer-review and editorship; and (3) making legibility a central issue in the work of journals and peer-reviewing, aligning it to onboarding practice and professional development while also pushing for both greater accountability and recognition of the work our community does as/while reviewers and editors.

Ultimately, it seems to me we can better use our influence within publishing environs to structurally adopt and publicly foster forms of accountability and ethical engagement that are desirable for such work to thrive, becoming less exploitative and more responsible. While the task is undoubtedly complex, it begins by creating a public, critical space for imagination, dialogue, and the reconfiguration of priorities.

Schmidt, Patrick. 2025. Making it legible: Learning challenges in the closed system of peer-review and editorship. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 24 (4): 49–70. https://doi.org/10.22176/act24.4.49

About the Author

Patrick Schmidt is professor of music and music education at Teachers College, Columbia University. Recent publications can be found in various journals focused on education, music and policy. Schmidt led consulting and evaluative projects for the National YoungArts Foundation and the New World Symphony. He co-edited the *Oxford Handbook of Music Education and Social Justice* (2015), the two-volume *Leadership in Higher Music Education* (2020) and the *Routledge Handbook for the Sociology of Music Education* (2021). His books *Policy and the Political Life of Music Education* and *Policy as Practice: A guide for Music Educators* were released by Oxford in 2017 and 2020.

References

Allmer, Thomas. 2018. Precarious, always-on and flexible: A case study of academics as information workers. *European Journal of Communication* 33 (4): 381–95. https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118783794

Apple, Michael, and Lois Weis. 1986. Seeing education relationally: The stratification of culture and people in the sociology of school knowledge. *Journal of Education* 168 (1): 2–34.

Church, Ian, and Peter Samuelson. 2016. *Intellectual humility: An introduction to the philosophy and science*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). 2011. *Code of conduct and best practice guidelines for journal editors*. https://publicationethics.org/core-practices

Foucault, Michel. 1967/1985. Of other spaces: Utopias and heterotopias. *Architecture/mouvement/continuité* 5: 46–49. Translated by Jay Miscowiec.

Freda, Margaret C., Margaret H. Kearney, Judith G. Baggs, Marion E. Broome, and Mary M. Dougherty. 2009. Peer reviewer training and editor support: Results from an international survey of nursing peer reviewers. *Journal of Professional Nursing* 25 (2): 101–08.

Genocchio, Benjamin. 1995. Discourse, discontinuity, difference: The question of other spaces. In *Postmodern cities and spaces*, edited by Sophie Watson and Katerine Gibson, 35–46. Blackwell.

Hirst, Andrew, and Douglas Altman. 2012. Are peer reviewers encouraged to use reporting guidelines? A survey of 116 health research journals. *PLoS ONE* 7 (4): e35621.

Schmidt, Patrick. 2025. Making it legible: Learning challenges in the closed system of peer-review and editorship. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 24 (4): 49–70. https://doi.org/10.22176/act24.4.49

Jefferson, Tom, Elizabeth Wager, and Frank Davidoff. 2020. Measuring the quality of editorial peer review. *JAMA* 287 (21): 2786–90. https://doi.org/jama.287.21.2786

Jones, Patrick M. 2009. Hard and soft policies in music education: Building the capacity of teachers to understand, study, and influence them. *Arts Education Policy Review* 110 (4): 27–32. https://doi.org/10.3200/AEPR.110.4.27-32

Krumrei-Mancuso, Elizabeth. 2017. Intellectual humility and prosocial values: Direct and mediated effects. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12 (1): 13–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1167938

Larivière, Vincent, Stefanie Haustein, and Philippe Mongeon. 2015. The Oligopoly of academic publishers in the digital era. *Plos One*. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0127502

Larson, Magali. 1977. *The rise of professionalism: A sociological analysis*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lupton, Deborah. 2014. *Digital sociology*. Routledge.

Nickerson, Raymond S. 2005. What authors want from journal reviewers and editors. *American Psychologist* 60 (6): 661–62.

Ozga, Jenny, and Martin Lawn. 1988. Schoolwork: Interpreting the labour process of teaching. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 9 (3): 323–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569880090305

Schmidt, Patrick. 2019. *Policy as practice: A guide for music educators*. Oxford University Press.

Settles, Isis H., Monica K. Jones, Nicole T. Buchanan, Kristie Dotson, Peyton Grower, Madeline O'Rourke, Marcelle Rinkus, and Kyla Latimer. 2024. Epistemic exclusion: A theory for understanding racism in faculty research evaluations. *The American psychologist* 79 (4): 539–52. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0001313

Squazzoni, Flaminio, Giangiacomo Bravo, Francisco Grimaldo, David García-Costa, Mike Farjam, and Bahar Mehmani. 2021. Peer review and gender bias: A study on 145 scholarly journals. *Science Advances* 7 (2): eabc3814. https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abc3814

Schmidt, Patrick. 2025. Making it legible: Learning challenges in the closed system of peer-review and editorship. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 24 (4): 49–70. https://doi.org/10.22176/act24.4.49

Tennant, Jonathon P., François Waldner, Damien C. Jacques, Paola Masuzzo, Lauren B. Collister, and Chris H. Hartgerink. 2016. The academic, economic and societal impacts of open access: An evidence-based review. *F1000Research* 5: 632. https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.8460.3

Topinka, Robert J. 2010. Foucault, Borges, heterotopia: Producing knowledge in other spaces. *Foucault Studies* 9: 54–70. https://doi.org/10.22439/fs.v0i9.3059

Ware, Mark. 2011. Peer review: Recent experience and future directions. *New Review of Information Networking* 16 (1): 23–53. https://doi.org/10.1080/13614576.2011.566812

Wolfram, Dietman, Peilin Wang, and Adam Hembree. 2020. Open peer review: Promoting transparency in open science. *Scientometrics* 125: 1033–105. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-020-03488-4

Wooten, Melissa, and Andrew J. Hoffman. 2008. Organizational fields: Past, present and future. In *The Sage handbook of organizational institutionalism*, edited by Royston Greenwood, Christine Oliver, Thomas Lawrence, and Renate Meyer, 130–48. SAGE Publications.

Wu, Joseph, Cheung, Hoy Yan, Chan, Raymond. 2017. Changing definition of teacher professionalism: Autonomy and accountability. In *Teacher empowerment toward professional development and practices,* edited by I. Amzat and N. Valdez, 59–70. Springer.

Yarbrough, Cornelia. 1984. A content analysis of the Journal of Research in Music Education, 1953–1983. *Journal of Research in Music Education* 32 (4): 213–22. https://doi.org/10.2307/3344920

Žižek, Slavoj. (2006). *The parallax view*. The MIT Press.

Notes

[1] I do recognize that there is self-interest in taking on the role of reviewer, from aspects of promotion and tenure to perceptions of status. I do also recognize that some engage in the role of reviewer from a position of power. Mainly, however, I do believe that peer-reviewing's most significant tensions are between sense of duty (selflessness) and the challenges of reproduction (doing as I have experienced).

Schmidt, Patrick. 2025. Making it legible: Learning challenges in the closed system of peer-review and editorship. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 24 (4): 49–70. https://doi.org/10.22176/act24.4.49

[2] See the following Inside Higher Ed for a sense of this challenge. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/science-research-policy/2024/08/29/open-access-expansion-threatens-academic

[3] https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/08-2022-OSTP-Public-access-Memo.pdf

[4] See Arostegui's contribution in this issue.

[5] Publishers are offering more detailed professional development on this area (see https://editorresources.taylorandfrancis.com/reviewer-guidelines/excellence-in-peer-review-reviewer-training-network/?utm_source=chatgpt.com) but I am suggesting that closer contact, cross journal but within field, might generate a distinct and less functional approach.

Schmidt, Patrick. 2025. Making it legible: Learning challenges in the closed system of peer-review and editorship. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 24 (4): 49–70. https://doi.org/10.22176/act24.4.49