Editorial

Referencing

Reference citations are a critical ingredient of a good paper. Upon first reading through a newly-arrived submission, I have found myself occasionally making a decision to request revisions before further review and in some extreme cases even to reject a paper largely based on poor referencing. One can easily criticize such an action as a shallow, superficial handling of submitted work that does not address the work's actual merits. Lets think about this a bit more.

The main criterion for publishing a paper is that it makes an archival contribution to new knowledge. The only way to demonstrate that a contribution is being made is to place the new work in the context of previous work. Reference citations properly articulated in the text of an introductory section provide the background of previous work and the context for the work to be presented. They help to show where there are gaps in knowledge that the presented work presumably fills.

The context criterion is generic for all journal articles, but it must be tailored to the particular journal and its audience. When I send a paper to JMD, I am thinking of the JMD readers: Who they are, what they may know about the subject, what would be their viewpoint of interest, and how the work will be useful to them. I would present a similar body of work quite differently to a different journal with different readership. In that spirit, it is important to provide reference citations for relevant work that has previously appeared in JMD or in related design journals that JMD readers are likely to also follow. Some may think that insisting upon this is a self-serving promotion of the journal, its authors, and associated popularity metrics. This is a rather misguided view that ignores the need for context to the specific readership, and also the fact that citation metrics for journals get penalized if the percent of self-citations exceeds certain common sense limits.

In the same vein, since JMD is an English language journal one will assume that most of the useful references will be in English to be accessible to English-speaking readers. While it is certainly acceptable for some portion of the references to be non-English language publications, these cannot dominate the reference list. Indeed, if some seminal work has appeared in a language other than English it will be of great service to the JMD readers if the author articulates and summarizes the referenced findings for the benefit of those who cannot access or understand the original source. Simply listing several papers without explaining why they are listed is never useful, and it becomes problematic if the citations are elusive to the majority of the intended audience.

Reference citations are also important when results of the work are presented. Whether theoretical, numerical or experimental, new results need to be validated against previous results and data. This is often how we claim progress in a subject and support the validity of our arguments on the value of the presented work. A comparison study on typical test problems is a common way to achieve that, and again proper referencing is key.

Finally, there are many areas where several of us work together, whether directly through actual collaboration or indirectly through sharing our new knowledge via the publication. Referencing allows us to link the work of various people working in a given area for the benefit of everyone.

Interestingly, in a casual Internet search, I discovered thoughts on the context of referencing, as the above, propagated for business-oriented research, see, http://www.ehow.com/info_8379909_importance-reference-citation-business-research.html#ixzz1ZpRqUfZt. Many of the more academic-oriented sites deal primarily with the style and norms of referencing, see e.g., http://www.usq.edu.au/library/help/referencing. Our own ASME Journal Tool site includes extensive style information in the authors' guide: http://journaltool.asme.org/Help/AuthorHelp/WebHelp/JournalsHelp.htm#Guidelines/Getting_Started.htm

Proper referencing is important also in a different form of context: Avoiding the impression or reality of publishing essentially the same work in more than one place or not giving adequate credit to previous contributors. I have remarked on these issues in an earlier editorial (http://asmejmd.org/show_editorial.php?id=22). I am happy to say that some of the problems I had encountered in my earlier years as editor are now extremely rare or extinct. Every little bit of communication seems to help.

Once again, there is nothing profound about what I am commenting here. Common sense usually goes a long way towards success in our efforts, including writing good papers.

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Editor