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# **HOW CAN GRADUATE STUDENTS CONTRIBUTE? REFLECTIONS ON CREATING A JOURNAL FOR AND BY GRADUATE STUDENTS**

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*In March 2016, the Emerging Perspectives: Interdisciplinary Graduate Research in Education and Psychology journal officially launched with the purpose of being a journal for and by graduate students, where they can gain support and experience with the peer-review process. While graduate students are encouraged to publish, many struggle to get involved in the process. One year after launching, the founding editorial board members reflected on the impetus for starting the journal, how they grew from this experience, and what they foresaw as the next steps for the journal.*

Keywords: graduate student training; higher education; peer-review process

## **INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS**

Being involved in the publication process is extremely beneficial for students as it provides opportunities for developing important skills such as problem solving and critical thinking (Ni Uigin, Higgins & McHale, 2015). It is also considered an integral component of professional development for budding academics (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). Garbati and Samuels (2013) demonstrated, however, that graduate student participation in publishing accounted for only 8.60% of all authors. Garbati and Samuels called for graduate programs to revisit their role in facilitating student authorship, either by formally transforming their degree requirements to allow first-time authors to get their work published or supporting their involvement in the peer-review practice. To

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address this gap and the recommendations provided regarding student authorship, graduate students in education and psychology created *Emerging Perspectives: Interdisciplinary Graduate Research in Education and Psychology (EPIGREP)*, a publication outlet for graduate students to gain experience in the peer-reviewed process as authors, reviewers, editors, or a combination of these roles. Specifically, the founding editorial team of EPIGREP consisted of seven graduate students in various specializations at the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary. In this paper, we look back on the first year of the journal's development through a duo-ethnographic lens, to reflect on the "bridges and barriers" (Morse, Nielsen-Pincus, Force, & Wulfhorst, 2007, p. 1) that we encountered throughout this collaborative process to better inform ours' and others' efforts and initiatives to increase student authorship.

In starting a student-run journal and writing this article, we experienced transformative learning, which is the theoretical underpinning that guided our inquiry. Mezirow (1991) noted transformative learning is a process whereby expectations and habits can be challenged through reflection and critique that may result in the transformation of "meaning perspectives" and "experience" of the interpretation (p. 6). A transformation occurs when new or transformed meaning schemas emerge, or when reflections centered on these assumptions transform meaning perspectives.

## **METHOD AND DATA ANALYSIS**

To facilitate our reflective practice, we used Norris and Sawyer's (2012) duo-ethnography. In duo-ethnography, two or more individuals offer their interpretations of a particular shared social experience and explore the points where interpretations meet and diverge in order to foster the development of ideas and perspectives (Nabavi & Lund, 2012). Through duo-ethnography participants can engage in ethical and trusting dialogue to understand their life as curriculum, gain different perspectives, challenge assumptions, switch from universal to subjective truth, and see

the connections between theory and practice (Norris & Sawyer, 2012). Specific to the current study, the authors engaged in an in-person, recorded, two-hour conversation around the research question “How does a group of graduate students make meaning of their experience starting and operating a journal?” Specifically, each author first shared an opening reflection about what brought them to the journal, and then the conversation moved into new reflections. The authors transcribed the recording, reviewed the transcript, and negotiated which were the critical learnings from the conversation.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

Although there is no prescriptive way to engage in duo-ethnography, Norris (2008) noted that one approach could be to synthesize data collection (i.e., stories) and analysis (identifying key shifts in learning) for an integrated discussion of findings. In duo-ethnography, whole conversations are presented in the discussion as evidence for shifts in learning and to support the identified themes. In the current study, there were two main themes, *new beginnings* and *future directions*.

### **New Beginnings: Impetus for Joining the Journal and Growing Pains**

As seen in the literature, there is lack of resources to support the development of publishing skills among graduate students (Garbati & Samuels, 2013). Hence, the conversation began with the editorial team discussing their experiences in publishing and how this brought them to the journal, constituting the first theme of *new beginnings*.

**Maisha:** Thinking about what brought me to the journal, when I came to Werklund I met a lot of graduate students for whom the focus was not on academia but practice. This was different from my previous experience where everyone was pushing for research. I thought about it from a structural point of view, do we provide the resources and the training where students think, “I’m comfortable being in academia?” I thought that having a journal that comes out of Werklund would

maybe be a beginning step for students to become more comfortable and get more opportunities and mentorship with publishing.

**Jon:** As someone who came to graduate school to become a practitioner, I understand where you're coming from Maisha, publishing seemed daunting to me. So, when I was invited to join the editorial team, I really wanted the journal to fill a niche, to target this gap that blocks students from participating in the publishing process.

**Brianna:** I had a negative experience where, in my master's, my supervisor encouraged me to submit one of my papers to a journal for publication. I just submitted the paper to a journal as a course paper without making any changes, not even changing the title page. The journal told me to re-submit with revisions, but I thought that it was a rejection, and I stopped the process—it was intimidating. I thought being involved in a journal where I know some of the people and they won't just get an online e-mail response from editors would be helpful.

**Konstantinos:** I was also thinking about my CV. I had already reviewed a few manuscripts with my supervisor sort of assisting, just to learn about the process of reviewing someone else's work for an academic journal. So, I was thinking, if this is the trajectory that I'm going to take in my future career, being involved in academia, I think that's a great opportunity for me to come in and learn from the inside-out, what's going on behind the scenes of publishing.

**Brit:** As for me it was more serendipitous than future career planning. I had just gone to a conference in open access publishing where I saw a presentation on someone creating a student journal. I was like yeah, I could help with online journal systems, I know who to talk to, I am already in contact with somebody. So, I then really saw it as my role to figure out the website and get us trained on that so it became tangible. Because I think that was one of our big roadblocks,

knowing what goes into a journal, what the expectations for editors, reviewers, and authors would be. These were all things that needed to be decided and outlined.

**Maisha:** That's right. In forming the initial editorial team, as a founding member, I thought that we needed to invite people we knew were hard workers. They would be consistent in their contributions, dedicated, and bold enough to take on a leadership role. Because being an editor it can be intimidating, you really have to be willing to create and put yourself and ideas out there to create something from scratch, something none of us have done before.

**Teresa:** A welcome surprise for me has been reaching out to faculty for help and getting so much support—they want us to succeed. For example, I published a few book reviews and found this was a good way to get your feet wet so wanted to help our authors, but when I contacted publishers, I was pretty much ignored until Dr. Shirley Steinberg sent me some of her contacts. We soon had 8 books ready to be reviewed! Working with these students on their book reviews has been very rewarding, and I'm appreciative of faculty support in making this happen.

From the conversation, we noted a shared experience of needing a training experience beyond the curriculum of our programs. Similar to findings from previous research (Ni Uigin et al., 2015), we received informal mentorship in our first publishing attempt and wanted to formalize an opportunity where other students could learn from these experiences. The journal seemed to be an ideal and concrete platform for this. As the conversation moved into some of the surprises we encountered during the establishment of the journal, we noticed that each member of the team brought an area of expertise that was a valuable piece in figuring how the journal would operate. Importantly, we recognized persistent gaps in our knowledge and our continued need for mentorship from faculty, mirroring the experience of the beginning authors we sought to help.

Moving Forward: Impact on Editorial Team and Future Direction

The conversation then evolved into how the journal impacted the editorial team with respect to their personal growth as beginning scholars and the concerns and goals they have to sustain the journal, making up the second theme of *moving forward*.

**Teresa:** What I have learned about myself through this process is to be in the moment when I am reviewing submissions. I have understood that it is important to take time to deeply read the work that is coming in and provide feedback that does not turn away an author but empowers them.

**Gina:** I see it as practicing self-compassion, learning to give myself permission to ask questions and for help. I would also like to model that with our student authors. When you are working on a paper, submitting it for review—it is understandably an anxious process, but it does not have to be perfect. There's a team at the journal that authors can learn from and that's really powerful.

**Jon:** Similar to what Gina said, I can be humble about what I don't know, but I can also be bold about what I do know. Being with the journal has given me the confidence to be bold in putting myself forward in whatever expertise I do have. As editors who are also students, we all have expertise at this point in our research area. My mentors have been saying this for a while and logically this made sense, but being in the journal, I have felt what they were saying.

**Brit:** That makes sense about where we are now and makes me curious, what's next?

**Konstantinos:** As we begin to think about future steps, I am cautious about outcomes. I am hoping our endeavour isn't a "Titanic" where we started something big and ambitious, but then it sinks.

**Maisha:** I think enticing student authors to publish with us is also a contributing factor to sustain the journal. We want to establish our journal as a platform in which beginning authors are enthusiastic and motivated to participate, learn how to develop manuscripts, get trained in peer-

reviewing and related skills, and processes associated with publishing. I think we are still lacking in this area and need to work on this in particular.

**Jon:** That makes me think about how we could collaborate with faculties to enhance students' participation with the journal. One suggestion would be to modify course curriculum slightly and have students write a paper for EPIGREP on whatever topic they would have written the course paper. This way, even if beginning authors are not confident about the publication process, they will be required to begin working on manuscripts and will receive mentorship from experienced faculty members. In return, our journal will also receive manuscripts that have been evaluated by faculty members, which will add to our peer-review process.

**Konstantinos:** I agree, we could put this forward to the Teaching and Learning Committee at Werklund, they always ask me what the journal is up to. It will be important to keep seeking faculty support to fill in our gaps of knowledge to make the journal successful.

As observed from the conversation, participating in the journal sparked further inspiration among the editors to empower graduate students to enhance their publishing skills. The editors envisioned themselves empowering graduate students through a collaborative process, which consists of peer mentorship and meaningful feedback to encourage students to take pride in their work and develop publishing skills. Simultaneously, the journal served as a learning platform for editors to apply their learned skills and expertise through various tasks, such as validating the suitability of manuscripts for publication and developing the journal's policies. Therefore, the journal has begun to fill in a gap for the editors (Garbati & Samuels, 2013), providing explicit training opportunities in publishing and scholarship. In regard to future directions, the conversation focused on the future steps necessary to sustain the journal. Along with financial support, the editors identified that there



will be a continuous need to increase student engagement and participation with the journal, preferably through collaboration with faculty and graduate programs.

## **IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

A critical implication of this study was that the authors noted the importance of including students in the solution to address gaps in graduate student training for participating in the publication process. Specifically, the editorial team realized that they each had their own relative expertise that allowed them to help empathize with beginning authors' struggles to enter the publication process and to address gaps in their abilities. At the same time, the editorial team also identified their own gaps in training that they hoped would be addressed through other members of the editorial board's expertise or through the assistance of faculty mentors to the journal. As such, the journal was a platform that the authors saw as both a means to assist and to be assisted in graduate student training for participating in the publication process.

A careful examination of the literature highlighted the importance of student involvement in the publication process (e.g., Garbati & Samuels, 2013; Gardner & Barnes, 2007). Using Norris and Sawyer's (2012) duo-ethnography, we, an interdisciplinary group of graduate students, engaged in a reflective conversation that allowed us to construct new meaning regarding the development of a student-run journal. Although rooted in each participant's experience (Mezirow, 1991), the duo-ethnographic analysis privileged our collective voice, giving "both similar and different meanings to a shared phenomenon" (Norris, 2008, p. 235) of establishing a graduate student journal. Our dialogue led to insights of our motives for the creation of the journal, the knowledge we have acquired, and our anticipations for the future. We hope that our experience will serve as a springboard for other graduate students aspiring to enhance the research culture of their programs.

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