

EDITORIAL

Reflecting on reflective essays in *IJSaP*

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Just over 3 years ago, I first heard of Students as Partners (SaP). My colleague at Hong Kong University, David Carless, who had recently been appointed a member of the *IJSaP* editorial board, introduced the concept to me. As an early-career teacher, educator, and scholar, I instantly saw the benefits pedagogical partnerships with students could bring to my development and to the courses and programs I was involved in. I had frequently pondered why students were not involved in decision-making or program design beyond formal consultations and feedback—after all, the programs were for them, right? And I knew that a greater sense of ownership over learning increases engagement and improves learning outcomes. Similarly, I could see that I could improve my teaching practices by working in partnership with students.

Coming from a primary education background, where teacher preparation is typically part of an extensive credentialing process, I was surprised to find a wide range of support for teacher development at the tertiary level, from none to extensive. Furthermore, I found the role of a university teacher educator could be incredibly diverse, requiring new knowledge and skills I did not yet have. These realizations led me to my first SaP project and experience with *IJSaP*.

My first project was a mentoring partnership; I partnered with a former tutee of mine, then a newly qualified teacher, with the reciprocal aims of helping her transition to her new role and for me to improve my mentoring practices. During our partnership, we kept a joint digital learning log where we wrote down our reflections on our experiences and interactions. When I shared my experience with David Carless, he encouraged me to write a reflective essay for *IJSaP*. From the submission of our manuscript to its publication, the experience was an incredibly positive one. The co-editors and reviewers provided detailed feedback in the form of questions which made us reflect more deeply on our partnership and provide a more reflective account on the experience. For example, the co-editors asked us, “How did you manage emotionally in the partnership?” This question made us reflect on our felt experiences and the conceptions we had about our roles within the partnership. Although we received critical feedback from reviewers, we could see that this was to help us deepen our reflection and enhance our essay. We were proud of our reflective essay because we felt it truthfully represented our experiences of the partnership (Moorhouse & Oh, 2019). The experience helped shape the editor and reviewer I wanted to be. It taught me the important role editors and reviewers have in helping authors shape their contributions and get to the heart of their partnership experiences.

In 2020, I was invited to join the editorial board of *IJSaP*, and I instantly agreed. For the past 18 months, my student co-editor, Connie, and I have been the main co-editors

responsible for seeing reflective essays through the review process. This has been a fruitful and worthwhile experience for many reasons. I have had the opportunity to work with a highly engaged, dedicated, and passionate editorial board, I have learned important lessons about how to provide a supportive and positive manuscript review process, and I have gained a huge appreciation for the reflective essay genre. Reflective essays have become one of the most popular genres in *IJSaP*. For example, in 2021, volume 5, issue 2 included 13 reflective essays!

As I leave the editorial board of *IJSaP*, I wish to reflect on what I have learned about reflective essays during my time on the board. Specifically, I want to focus on the unique nature of reflective essays and the roles of authors, reviewers, and editors in helping disseminate the lived experiences of faculty, staff, and students engaged in SaP. The reflections also draw on a task force meeting attended by *IJSaP* co-editors Alison Cook-Sather, Sarah Slates, Kelly Matthews, Caelan Rafferty, Nattalia Godbold, and me, where we explored ways to enhance the author and reviewer experience of reflective essays.

WHAT ARE REFLECTIVE ESSAYS?

Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather (2020) define a reflective essay as “a personal, contemplative, critical analysis based on lived experience but not necessarily grounded in your own data or others’ research.” (p. 193–194). This form of writing constitutes a unique genre that requires both thoughtful explorations of the lived experiences of SaP work and critical analysis of those experiences. Engaging in SaP can often be an unfamiliar and sometimes unnerving experience. In SaP work, faculty, staff members, and students all struggle to negotiate new relationships as they challenge traditional power structures and develop new ways of working together. These experiences often lead to deep personal reflection as we look at our practices, beliefs, and conceptions in new ways. Reflective essays are one of the few genres that not only invite such personal reflection but also see it as essential to informed and intentional practice. As Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten (2019) write, “reflection is essential to learning, and is a necessary component of SoTL inquiry, but is not adequately acknowledged or captured in traditional forms of academic discourse” (p. 15).

As they are deeply personal, reflective essays are written in the first person and present insights into the lived experience of the partnership (Healey et al., 2020). They are not simply descriptive or narrative, although they include description and narration. Rather, they are narrative combined with rigorous analysis—visibly wrestling with struggle and uncertainty as well as success and insights gained (Cook-Sather et al., 2019). It is common for reflective essays to be co-authored by faculty and student partners—drawing on their different perspectives to understand the shared experience they are engaged in—but faculty, staff, and students can use the genre to delve deeply into their individual experiences as well. Reflective essays do not require large numbers of citations or data; indeed, the purpose, as noted above, is to legitimate lived experience as a form of data and critical analysis of the messy work of partnership (Cook-Sather, Abbot, & Felten, 2019).

These essays require intentional reorientation by authors in the drafting and revision processes and careful stewardship by editors through the review process because the genre is unfamiliar, the writings are personal, and both the writing and the review process can reveal the vulnerabilities of the authors. Below I explore the roles and responsibilities of reflective essay authors, reviewers, and co-editors as I see them as well as offer advice for all three.

THE AUTHORS

For authors, it is essential that when they engage in the process of writing a reflective essay, they provide enough description or narrative of their experience to orient readers and also commit to presenting an open and honest critique of those lived experiences. For instance, a faculty member might describe a situation in which they find themselves navigating a new dynamic as they work in partnership with a student, one that prompts them to face realities they might otherwise have avoided, as one faculty member, Chanelle Wilson, wrote about working with her student partner, Mercedes Davis:

Working in partnership with Mercedes was a new learning experience for me; I had not had the opportunity to work so closely with a student. In many ways, I welcomed this, but I cannot pretend that it was easy the entire time. For example, there was one student who frequently missed class or was very late. I noticed this, but Mercedes forced me to hold the student accountable. (Wilson & Davis, 2020, p. 157)

Writing a reflective essay can be an enriching process, as writing deepens the act of reflection. Actively thinking about how to present the complexity of partnership to an audience can be invigorating but also destabilizing.

While it can be rewarding, writing a reflective essay carries inherent risks that other academic genres do not. Most academic genres call for a detachment of the author from the subject under study, with the aim of appearing to be objective. In reflective essays, the self is the subject. It is a first-hand account of the partnership, where the authors' practices, thoughts, emotions, uncertainties, (mis)conceptions, challenges, and contradictions can be exposed and made public. This form of writing requires courage and humility—a different kind of rigor than traditional academic writing (Cook-Sather et al., 2019; Felten, 2017; Woolmer, 2018).

For authors, it is crucial that they realize the vulnerability inherent in reflective essay writing and are open to sharing their successes and struggles. For example, in Nandeeta Bala and Jonathon Kahn's reflective essay, Jonathon, the faculty partner, shared how partnering with Nandeeta made him more intensely aware of his ignorance (Bala & Kahn, 2021). While this awareness enabled him to adopt more participatory practices, the admission could open him up to critique. However, it is this realness of the experience that helps others relate and learn from reading reflective essays.

When you are engaging in a partnership that you plan to write about, it can be a good idea to keep a log of your experiences and reflections on those experiences. As the partnership progresses, you can note successes, points of tension, emotions, challenges, and insights. This can be in a collaborative space like a shared online document or a private log. This is the approach Melanie Oh Hye Min and I used, as we explained in our reflective essay:

we used weekly video chats, shared documents through e-mail, and regularly corresponded through instant messaging. After every interaction, we would use Google Docs to record the date and main topics that had been discussed. We would then write down our reflections on the interactions. Both of us could see and comment on what the other had written. Google Docs became a shared

space for us to deepen and engage in reciprocal reflections. (Moorhouse & Oh, 2019, p. 157)

Alternatively, before, during, and after a project, partners can spend time engaging in dialogic reflection about their partnership to understand better their learning from it. These documents can help when you begin to write a reflective essay. They present your thoughts and ideas as they evolved. A group of student and staff partners described a version of the latter approach in their reflective essay (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). For further advice on writing and submitting reflective essays, please visit the *IJSaP* website submission page: <https://mulpress.mcmaster.ca/ijsap/about/submissions>.

THE REVIEWERS

For reviewers, responding to reflective essays can be challenging. The personal nature of reflective essays means the review should be undertaken in a sensitive and open-minded manner. While *IJSaP* takes a developmental approach to reviewing submissions in all genres, this approach must be enacted especially carefully in relation to reflective essays because the writing is so personal and the authors are so vulnerable. We believe that everyone's lived experiences of SaP work have value, and we can learn from the analyses of those experiences that each of us offers. Therefore, quality is reflected in how the authors present and critically analyze their lived experiences and demonstrate their learning from experience. In conducting the review, reviewers should acknowledge and validate the authors' lived experiences and use questions and prompts to help guide the authors to enhance the quality of their essay.

The reviewers' comments often include questions and thoughts they have pondered about as they read the article—responding as much as the intended audience, as a reviewer. Consider, for example, an anonymous reviewer's comments on a reflective essay draft:

I really loved reading this essay and I think the conversation structure was very effective and readable. The core issue, that of who gets to participate in programs like this, is very important and will be recognizable to most readers. I would like to congratulate Author 1 on creating a new role that has clearly added a great deal of value to the program. I would like to hear a little more about the program itself - its aims and what is involved. There is probably scope to reduce some of the information on the wider background in the first two paragraphs to free some space to give the reader a little more information about this specific initiative to contextualize the conversation.

When writing comments to the author, it is a good idea to think about how they will feel when they read them. As the above extract shows, reviewers often use the first person with explicit acknowledgment of the author(s)' lived experience, while carefully providing advice to help the author improve the quality of their essay. For many authors, writing a reflective essay for *IJSaP* could be the first time they have shared their personal experiences of partnership; we need to be sensitive to this and respond accordingly. If you are interested in becoming a reviewer for *IJSaP* please email the editorial manager (ijsap@mcmaster.ca). Students and faculty members interested in SaP are all welcome.

THE CO-EDITOR(S)

At *IJSaP*, each submission is managed by a team of a student co-editor and a staff or faculty co-editor. Our role as co-editors is to carefully steward the essay through the review process. Whenever we respond and engage with authors, we consciously remind ourselves of the inherent vulnerability of the reflective essay genre. This awareness helps us select suitable reviewers and frame our editorial comments. It is very pleasurable to edit reflective essays, as the goal is not so much to select or reject but to help others share their lived experiences of SaP with the world. I and other co-editors who shepherd reflective essays through the review process often use a variation of this kind of response both to encourage and to guide authors:

This is an exciting project, and the framework you use has the potential to work very well as an organizing structure for your essay. It is especially important to address the challenges that international students face, which, as you describe, are not well understood. At this point, the essay includes much more description than reflection, so we ask that you revise according to the editor and reviewer feedback below to bring the essay in line with the criteria for reflective essays, which are quite different from other forms of writing.

After a general message like this, co-editors typically work through specific recommendations and often reiterate the criteria for reflective essays, since they are unfamiliar to most authors.

THE CURRENT REVIEW PROCESS AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

We encourage colleagues interested in writing a reflective essay to submit a proposal first. The co-editors responsible for reflective essays review the document to see if the proposed essay fits the journal scope and genre style. The co-editors also provide tailored suggestions and links to relevant resources to help the authors with their writing process. If the authors decide to write and submit a reflective essay, they submit it through the online submission system.

When an essay is submitted, the editorial team reviews the submission and checks that it fits the scope and genre style. Sometimes, we ask authors to make changes before we send the manuscript out for review or suggest that the essay would be a better fit as a case study or other genre. If we are happy that it fits the scope and style, we move it forward to the peer review stage.

Currently, we implement a double-blind review process. Each essay is reviewed by two members of the board of reviewers—a student and a faculty or staff member. We aim to select one reviewer from the same region as the author(s) and the other from a different part of the world, as befits an international journal. After the reviewers' comments are submitted, the editors read and collate the comments, make an editorial decision (accept, minor revisions, resubmit, reject), and write editors' comments. If the article is accepted, it goes to the copyediting stage and finally it is published in an issue. If the decision is to revise, the authors are invited to revise the manuscript and respond to the comments. If the decision is minor revisions, the co-editors check the revised essay to see whether the authors have made these and the paper is ready to go for copyediting. If the decision is that a resubmission is needed and the authors agree to undertake this work, the resubmitted

essay normally goes out for a second round of reviews. The most common decisions are that minor or major revisions are required.

The process is very similar to many academic journals. This has led us to think about whether the process reflects the unique genre of reflective essays or not. We have asked ourselves: What do authors need in a review process for a reflective essay? Should the process be more dialogic and relational? How can we prioritize the sharing of lived experiences in the review process? What are the roles of reviewers and co-editors in curating reflective essays?

We are still pondering these questions. One possibility we are discussing is adopting an open review process where authors and reviewers will be known to each other. They can then engage in dialogue around the common goal of improving the quality of the reflective essays. Editors would help connect the authors and reviewers, monitor the process, and help them find common ground. They would still make the final decision on an essay's readiness for publication. We are also considering providing reviewers with guidelines on how to construct a response to reflective essays. As Connie and I depart from the editorial board, the board is continuing to explore these possibilities and encourage readers to express their views by writing to the editorial manager (ijsap@mcmaster.ca).

CONCLUSION

This editorial has served as a reflection on reflective essays. It has presented the key roles and responsibilities of authors, reviewers, and editors and some advice I learned from my time with *IJSaP*. My experiences as an author, reviewer, and co-editor have taught me the importance each role has in sharing and disseminating the lived experiences of partnership through reflective essays. It has also taught me the importance of continuously reflecting on our policies, practices, and processes and whether they align with our principles. I am extremely grateful to the *IJSaP* editorial board for accepting me into their supportive, reflective, and critical community.

Writing a reflective essay can be a great way to gain your first experience of writing for publication. I can attest that it is a fun, rewarding, and eye-opening experience. We encourage colleagues to submit reflective essays to *IJSaP*. We can then gain a greater understanding of the diverse and unique lived experience of pedagogical partnership.

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