

## REFLECTIVE ESSAY

**Developing an open and dialogic review of reflective essays: An empathic and inclusive approach to advance students-as-partners practices**

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My journey to serving as co-editor of the reflective essays section of *IJSaP* was not one I would have predicted, given my prior experience and training. My role in piloting and then establishing an open, dialogic review process for reflective essays submitted to *IJSaP* was also not one I anticipated. Taking up the genre once again to tell this story, I write this reflective essay to share my journey and the insights I gained along the way.

## MY BACKGROUND AND FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH REFLECTIVE WRITING

As an undergraduate, I majored in psychology, and my doctoral work trained me to write empirical articles that rely heavily on quantitative evidence. In adhering to the norms of my discipline, I typically use the third person in my field and draw on credible scientific sources and empirical data to support my claims rather than sharing personal experiences. In the name of objectivity, the scientific tradition in my field sometimes prevents me from using the first person, which keeps me distant from owning my research experience. Engaging in reflective writing has prompted me to reassess my approach to academic discourse. Through introspection, I've realized the importance of personal perspective and voice in scholarly communication.

In 2020, I had the opportunity to co-author my very first reflective piece of writing, a chapter entitled "Untangling the Power Dynamics in Forging Student-Faculty Collaboration," which was included in a collection called *Building Courage, Confidence, and Capacity in Learning and Teaching through Student-Faculty Partnership: Stories from Across Contexts and Arenas of Practice* (2020), edited by Alison Cook-Sather and Chanelle Wilson. The invitation to write in a reflective mode, which is a personal form of writing, came across as an exciting, albeit overwhelming, task. I was excited because writing a reflective piece was an opportunity to own my work, associate my thoughts and emotions with my personal experiences, and focus on the process of writing rather than just worrying about reporting my findings. The vulnerability involved in opening up, being transparent, engaging in deep introspection, and self-critiquing that is required by reflective writing overwhelmed me. For example, when reflecting and writing about mitigating power distance with my student partner, I questioned the validity of my practices and perspectives. This process of digging deeper into my experience put me on the spot. The fluidity of the writing structure, namely first-person writing and a storytelling format,

contributed to my anxiety as it deviated from the established norms favoring third-person and structured objectivity in my discipline. However, as soon as the review process began, my apprehension dissipated. In fact, I began to feel enthusiastic as a consequence of a unique peer-review process. The way the book editors encouraged me to write personally and grow through reflection made my first experience with reflective writing a treasured experience. The guidance they provided in the form of interview questions triggered deeper reflection and gently pushed me backward and inward to meticulously examine my lived experiences of partnership collaborations. For example, I was asked, “Can you tell how this conversation came about and how the decision came to be?” I began to view my partnership collaboration, its dynamics, and its associated experiences in a new light, which in the absence of that careful stewardship in a safe and welcoming space would not have been possible.

This experience ignited within me a profound longing for a more compassionate and humane academic writing culture. It left me wondering how transformative and enriching our academic community could become if we embraced a developmental, supportive approach to peer review rather than an approach that seeks to hold authors to narrow, ostensibly objective standards; often disregards their feelings in reviewing their work; and keeps a distance between (and even dehumanizes) the people involved. I had yet to begin serving as the editor of the reflective essay section of *IJSaP*, but my own experience stayed powerfully with me.

#### RETHINKING THE ANONYMIZED REVIEW PROCESS FOR REFLECTIVE WRITING

At the end of 2022, in a meeting of *IJSaP* editorial board members, we discussed the challenge many authors of reflective essays and their reviewers face because of the approaches to reviewing described above. We wondered if we might pilot a non-anonymized review process consistent with the values and ethos guiding our collaborative approach as a journal and as editors.

In this process, we proposed, the identities of both authors and reviewers would be unmasked. The review process would embrace a dialogic review, emphasizing interactivity and discussion to assess the essay’s content, style, and suitability for the journal and to work toward bringing it in line with both the journal’s and the genre’s goals. The idea was communicated to me by the editorial team that had overseen the reflective essay section since the journal’s launch in 2017 (Alison Cook-Sather and her student co-editor Anita Acai) and the editorial team that had assumed subsequent responsibility for overseeing the section (Ben Moorhouse and his student co-editor Connie). The editorial team first proposed the idea of a dialogic route for reflective essays (Moorhouse, 2022), which became the foundation for a non-anonymized review process at *IJSaP*.

Recalling my experiences of writing my first reflective piece for the edited volume and the connection created during the dialogic review, I agreed to take up the proposal as an editorial board member. This idea was undeniably potent and exhilarating, but the road to implementation was clouded with uncertainties.

My student co-editor, Zhen Zhen Xia (Janet) and I harbored significant concerns about whether both reviewers and authors would be willing to commit to a process demanding a different kind of dedication, time, and energy from a traditional, anonymized review. Engaging in open, dialogic reviews, we anticipated, would surely be more demanding on a professional and

personal front. The idea of revealing one's identity in a review and engaging in open and critical dialogue would, we assumed, require a great deal of open-mindedness and courage, particularly from student authors and reviewers. I couldn't help but worry about the dynamics between student reviewers and faculty authors. For example, students might be reluctant to provide constructive criticism or express their opinions openly when reviewing faculty-authored work. Additionally, they might worry about their ability to communicate their thoughts clearly and professionally to faculty authors. Similarly, some faculty might be reluctant to take student reviewer feedback seriously and constructively. Nonetheless, with our board members' support, particularly Alison Cook-Sather's and Mick Healey's invaluable guidance and unwavering support, my student partner and I decided to embark on piloting this process at the beginning of 2023.

### THE GENRE OF REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Before I delve into my experiences of editing reflective essays using an open and dialogic review process during the pilot phase, it's crucial to provide a brief introduction to the genre of reflective essays as defined by *IJSaP*. Guidelines for engaging in this form of writing are clearly explained in the chapter "Revealing the Process: Reflective Essays," co-authored by Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather (2020) in *Writing About Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations Across a Range of Genres*.

Reflective essay writing centers on learning from one's experiences. Healey et al. (2020) advocate writing freely, emphasizing that the process can be complex and occasionally uncertain. They contend that this process leads to significant learning for both authors and readers, affording more freedom compared to traditional writing and enabling exploration of the complex nuances inherent in teaching and learning experiences. These arguments build on the work of Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten (2019), who argue for legitimizing reflective writing as a genre for academic discourse. The clear guidelines for writing reflective essays can be found on *IJSaP*'s website; see [IJSaP Submissions](#).

### CREATION OF A COMMUNITY

Before we piloted the new review process, we created a comprehensive list of students, faculty, and staff authors who had previously contributed reflective essays to *IJSaP*, *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, and other outlets that publish reflective essays. Our objective was to invite those who understand the genre. Once the student and faculty reviewers were recruited, section editors introduced them to the authors and created a Google Doc with editing and access rights for all parties involved. Reviewers were to conduct the work asynchronously, leaving comments that authors would address in subsequent iterations. We anticipated that this method would help overcome the time zone differences of the members involved and offer flexibility due to other time commitments.

We piloted the open, dialogic review process on a reflective essay Alison Cook-Sather wrote, and we kept notes on the process as we went, drafting operational guidelines that we would offer to authors and reviewers who agreed to engage in this review process. The process, which did not involve anonymization, included editors, authors, and reviewers working together on a shared Google Doc. Reviewers were given a guide for conducting the review. The process

typically involved two rounds with set deadlines for both reviewers and authors. The entire process took around 8 to 10 weeks.

This experience helped us lay additional guidelines, such as that the dialogue around review recommendations may continue until all parties agree either that the essay is complete or that it cannot align with the criteria for reflective essays. Throughout the process, section editors can also provide comments and respond until a final decision is reached. After completion of the review process, authors can upload the final copy to the online journal management system.

To continue the pilot, we sent invitations to reviewers. Contrary to our initial doubts, a majority of invited reviewers enthusiastically agreed to participate in this review exercise. Their responses to our invitation were, “This sounds great! I would love to be included,” and “I am excited to experience this developmental review.” Their enthusiasm was apparent in their responses to our emails. Several mentioned that they were excited to experience such a collaboration. Almost all the authors who submitted their essays to *IJSaP* during this period also expressed the same enthusiasm. Each of them agreed to come on board. These positive and enthusiastic responses were encouraging and confirmed for me that practitioners of student-faculty partnerships value a transparent and collegial approach to evaluating partnership work.

Over the pilot period, we oversaw five reflective essays through open and dialogic review, and with each review, we witnessed the creation of a supportive community of faculty/staff authors and reviewers and student authors and reviewers who were willing to give time and support by demonstrating the values we apply for fostering effective partnerships. While the degree and depth of interaction varied from essay to essay, the underlying intention of genuine engagement, dialogue, and support was consistent. The reviewers' feedback was often affirming and filled with positive emotions. For example, reviewers left comments like “What a powerful statement” and made meaningful queries that required more than surface-level reading of someone's work, such as “What was that new experience like? How did it feel to engage in this way?” The authors' responses, such as, “It was a wonderful experience engaging in this dialogue” and “[you] have helped me dig deeper, and in the process, challenged my thinking even further,” seemed to reflect that they felt connected with the community and their work. As I read their revisions and responses, it seemed to me that the authors welcomed and addressed comments with equal enthusiasm and clarified doubts if they had any.

From my perspective as co-editor, this deeper engagement and dialogue translated into excellent pieces that showcase partnership work. It was heartening to see comments such as, “It was an exciting collaboration,” “Thank you for inviting me/us to join,” and “It was an enjoyable . . . learning process,” among others.

We do not have empirical data, but we interpret authors' and reviewers' responses to the process to suggest that it empowered both parties and contributed to their growth as authors, reviewers, and practitioners of student-faculty partnerships. A basic quantitative data analysis from the pilot project suggested that the median time to accomplish the open and dialogic review is 8 weeks, indicating a high degree of engagement and interest in the process. The fact that the process was faster than the usual review process can be attributed to the close connection and sense of accountability between the reviewers and authors, who responded to each other's comments in a timely manner and with great enthusiasm.

After this pilot phase, the *IJSaP* editorial board agreed to adopt the open, dialogic review approach as the default method for reviewing reflective essays. However, the traditional anonymized method is still open to authors to request at submission.

## ADVOCACY

It was interesting to me to pilot this non-anonymized peer-review process during a time when academic publishing faces its most significant challenge due to the commercialization of scientific publishing (Puehringer et al., 2021), exacerbating the existing crisis in obtaining quality review of scholarly work. The review process can often be prolonged, mechanical, and occasionally of subpar quality, although peer review remains a fundamental aspect of an academic professional's profile, offering valuable opportunities for professional and personal growth.

In the case of genres like reflective essays, which delve into lived experiences and personal narratives of partnership experiences, I now feel confident advocating for peer reviewing practices that are transparent, developmental, and supportive, especially in advancing fields like students as partners. Context-based practices, such as students-as-partners work, are inherently personal and subjective and embody human experiences, emotions, and connections. Writing reflective essays is deeply intertwined with our identities. Thus, peer-reviewing reflective essays requires mindful listening, compassion, meticulous attention to detail, and a bi-directional dialogue.

I believe that the current open and dialogic review process provides that ecosystem. The non-anonymous review process encourages both authors and reviewers to bring in their professional and social identities, relinquishing any notion of strict objectivity. This, in turn, enables more contextual criticism of partnership work in an affirmative and collegial way. In particular, for producing robust reflective essays, stewardship becomes a key element, providing guidance and clarity to what can sometimes be a disorganized and chaotic internal exploration during the writing process. I remember one faculty reviewer, while peer reviewing the reflective essay co-authored by two student authors, providing rich commentary on the essay using affirmation. The suggestions for revisions were woven with a rationale through which the reviewer explained how the edits could add value, and the reviewer gave the authors the choice to accept the suggestion as it was, in a different form, or not at all. In response to this particular comment, the student authors were able to explain their perspectives and ask meaningful questions while revising the essay. I found this so much richer and more thoughtful as an exchange than the anonymized forms of review that do not include such dialogue.

In another instance, one of the authors who is actively involved in equity and inclusion work in student-faculty partnerships used the term "the white space" in her essay. The student reviewer, being from China, asked, "I am not quite sure what this implies, could you please kindly explain a bit more?" To which the author generously suggested an alternative phrase and asked "If this is a familiar phrase, or is that also too US-based?" I believe this dialogic experience, not shrouded in anonymity, where both party's perspectives and positionalities were known, lent authenticity to the work, which is relevant to wider audiences.

Also, my sense from the essays that have gone through this process so far is that reviewers, following explicit journal guidelines meant to foster respect and genuine curiosity as well as thoughtful feedback and suggestions, engage deeply with the authors' work, posing

thought-provoking questions that encourage guided exploration. This process allows authors of reflective essays to uncover hidden insights and emotions they might otherwise overlook, as was my experience when I co-authored that chapter for *Building Courage, Confidence, and Capacity* (2020).

During the pilot phase of the non-anonymized review process, I noticed that the questions raised by reviewers took a form of questioning used in narrative inquiry. The questions were mainly follow-up, exploratory, and seeking specific stances and emotional details to gather more insights. For example, one reviewer wrote: “I was hoping to understand a little bit more about the emotional experience of doing this work for you.” Another wrote: “Could you elaborate in a sentence or two at the end of this paragraph about how this freedom, brainstorming, and collaboration made you feel?” The questions sometimes focused on temporal sequencing, encouraging authors to provide a chronological account of their experiences. For example, “When might these conversations happen (beginning? or middle? of a partnership)?” This helped in understanding the unfolding of events over time.

I believe that the review process, supported by journal guidelines, fosters an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere, focusing on constructive feedback and development to enhance the practices of student-faculty partnerships. This space, by providing stewardship and collegial guidance, is especially beneficial for early-career and student researchers navigating the world of peer reviewing. Receiving feedback on scholarly work through traditional review processes can often feel daunting and stressful, particularly for those new to scientific communication fearing criticism or rejection. However, engaging in both receiving and giving reviews offers valuable learning opportunities. Personally, I recall experiencing growth as an author while writing my first reflective piece. The exploratory questions taught me to reflect, introspect, and in several places analyze my experiences with courage and honesty while embracing vulnerability. While we haven’t formally asked reviewers who were engaged in this pilot about their learning experiences, the comments left at the end of the review process suggested that they enjoyed and benefited from it.

## CHALLENGES

While the proposed review process seems to offer a powerful means to demonstrate camaraderie and foster collegial scholarly peer-review committees, its mainstream application poses significant challenges. One of the critical hurdles lies in the recruitment of reviewers who are not only willing to invest time and energy but also possess a genuine interest and commitment to engaging in open dialogic review. Given my own experience, I understand that such a practice requires individuals with a sincere passion for the subject matter and a clear intention to participate in personal and professional transformation. It is important to acknowledge that the process of stewardship involved is both time-intensive and energy-consuming. Managing academic workloads alongside this mindful stewardship requires reviewers to develop empathy and delve deeper into the experiences of others—additionally, asking meaningful questions necessitates a foundation of empathy. To facilitate the review process, the journal has a comprehensive set of guidelines on how to review reflective essays published on its website.

Second, I continue to wonder if the inherent power imbalance between faculty and students in an academic setting may affect the students' ability to provide candid and critical feedback on the work of a faculty author. Students might feel reluctant to express dissenting opinions or provide constructive criticism. This may hinder a candid evaluation that is essential for scholarly peer reviewing.

Finally, I worry that this effective collaborative space may not be entirely inclusive despite its potential. The non-anonymous identities and positionalities may perpetuate bias, existing power dynamics, and hierarchies. Only those with courage and confidence would embrace this approach. However, recognizing that even a small beginning is worthwhile, I am excited to continue on the journey toward establishing a more inclusive and effective review process.

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#### NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

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