*Alison Cook-Sather, BRYN MAWR COLLEGE, acooksat@brynmawr.edu*
*Ruth L. Healey, UNIVERSITY OF CHESTER, r.healey@chester.ac.uk*

# Toward Greater Transparency and Inclusion in Manuscript Review Processes: A Relational Model

## ABSTRACT

Peer review is widely accepted as critical to legitimating scholarly publication, and yet, it runs the risk of reproducing inequities in publishing processes and products. Acknowledging at once the historical need to legitimize SoTL publications, the current danger of reproducing exclusive practices, and the aspirational goal to "practice what we preach" as SoTL practitioners regarding effective feedback to students, we argue for rethinking "rigor," developing more inclusive practices, and engaging in greater transparency in relation to peer review. To situate our discussion, we revisit foundational work in the development of SoTL and then offer an analytical framework informed by recent scholarship on redefining rigor and the emotional experience of receiving feedback. Using this framework, we propose a relational model of peer review and present two examples of efforts in which we have been involved as founding co-editors of the *International Journal for Students as Partners* to move toward greater transparency and inclusion in manuscript review processes.

## KEYWORDS

peer-review, transparency, emotional experience of feedback, rigor, three Ps of SoTL

## INTRODUCTION

The practice of peer review began in the seventeenth century and became common after World War II as a way of legitimizing and validating academic research (Garrido-Gallego 2018; Overall 2015). However, peer review is a contested practice (Tennant and Ross-Hellauer 2020). While it may "work in theory," it "becomes deeply suspect when put under the bright lights of real-world social processes" (Babin and Guidry Moulard 2018, 150). Academic peer review processes have been criticized for their lack of transparency, apprehension towards innovative ideas, gate-keeping, and unconstructive, inappropriate, and/or substandard reviews when there is an absence of reviewer accountability (Arumugam, Mehta, and Baxter 2020; Garrido-Gallego 2018; Overall 2015). Furthermore, the claim that peer review is objective comes into question when we note that objectivity, as indicated by reviewer corroboration and agreement, is limited. Indeed, evidence demonstrates low inter-reviewer reliability (Babin and Guidry Moulard 2018), and leading voices in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) suggest that "even with helpful criteria and clear guidance, the peer review is an inherently subjective genre" (Chick 2024, 92).

As might be expected, authors tend to be more positive about the review process when their work is accepted for publication, and less so when their work is rejected (Babin and Guidry Moulard 2018). High rejection rates—80% of submissions to social science journals do not proceed beyond the initial round of reviews (Overall 2015)—mean a large proportion of authors experience the "ultimate catastrophe" of ending the review process with a rejected manuscript (Babin and Guidry Moulard 2018, 151). Early career academics and academics for whom English is not their native language tend to perceive the peer review system as less fair than others (Chun-Man Ho et al. 2013; Overall 2015). The impact of such rejection and inequity can be particularly damaging to the psyche of such academics, who sometimes become "cynical, disengage, and leave their careers prematurely" (Overall 2015, 279).

Despite the limitations and concerns noted above, the vast majority of manuscripts published in scholarly journals go through some kind of peer-review process. Publications, and the processes that support them, can either reproduce or challenge inequities (Cook-Sather, Matthews, and Healey 2020). Like emerging practices of citation justice (Coalter 2023), efforts to make traditional forms of peer review more explicit and transparent, and also to develop more inclusive, relationship-based practices, can help us achieve several desirable outcomes. First, such efforts can move us towards a more humanizing experience and equitable practice in any given peer-review process. Second, they can afford a unique professional development opportunity to help spread such humanizing and equitable review processes. Finally, they can allow us to acknowledge and support the emotional impact of going through peer-review processes as academics, paralleling the student emotional experience around receiving feedback (Hill et al. 2023) and acting on what we advocate for as SoTL practitioners.

SoTL has a particular responsibility to be thoughtful and intentional about these processes, since it is the study of the most basic work of education and should, therefore, practice what it preaches. Acknowledging at once the historical need to legitimize SoTL publications, the potential of current practices to perpetuate inequities, and the aspirational goal of better practicing what we preach as SoTL practitioners regarding effective feedback to students, we offer a framework for and examples of rethinking "rigor." This framework engages in greater transparency and develops more inclusive practices in relation to peer review. To situate our discussion, we revisit the three Ps that Shulman (2001) argued should be addressed through SoTL work—professionalism, pragmatism, and policy—not to suggest that peer review is a form of SoTL but rather to argue that peer review within SoTL should wrestle with the same considerations. We weave revisions of these three Ps throughout our discussion, and, similarly, revisit SoTL literature intended to apply to classroom practices as parallels, not equations, to review writing about teaching and learning. With the original arguments for legitimizing SoTL as background, we offer an analytical framework informed by a redefinition of rigor and recent scholarship on the emotional experience of receiving feedback, both of which inform a relational model of peer review, a developmental model (Hutchings 2000) that identifies and promotes inclusive and humane practices.

The majority of our discussion focuses on two examples of ongoing efforts in which we have been involved as founding co-editors of the *International Journal for Students as Partners* (*IJSaP*). Launched in 2017, *IJSaP* has developed and enacted a review process that strives for greater transparency and inclusion. This work has been integral to the larger commitment *IJSaP* editors embrace in order to expand the genres that are considered legitimate and valuable in writing about teaching and learning (Healey, Cook-Sather, and Matthews 2020). The first is the moment of the journal's founding, when Ruth Healey was among the editors who led the articulation of guidance for the standard, anonymized, peer-review process. The second is the moment when we decided to pilot an open, non-anonymous, peer-review process for the reflective essay section of the journal, for which Alison Cook-Sather took on a leadership role. In our discussion and implications sections, we link back to foundational SoTL scholarship in relation to reconceptualizations of rigor, inclusive feedback practices, the emotional experience of both, and the potential for these reconceptualizations to humanize and make the peer review process more equitable.

## BACKGROUND: REVISITING THE THREE P'S OF SOTL

Establishing SoTL as a legitimate arena of practice included addressing what Shulman (2001) identified as three rationales for investment in SoTL. He called these the three Ps: professionalism, pragmatism, and policy.

Shulman (2001, 2) defined the first P as "obligations and opportunities associated with becoming a professional scholar/educator." In the realm of SoTL, professionalism includes making your work public (Felten 2013). For this work to be highly regarded, it must be peer reviewed (Enslin and Hedge 2018), even though, as noted above, that process has been criticized for lack of transparency, gatekeeping, conservatism, and absence of reviewer accountability (Arumugam, Mehta, and Baxter 2020; Garrido-Gallego 2018; Overall 2015). The obligation and opportunity to publish relies on the uncompensated obligation (and opportunity) to review (Irfanullah 2021). We inherit, then, from the advent of SoTL a practice required for participation that runs the risk of reproducing both processes and products that are not inclusive or equitable.

The labor of peer review individuals undertake as part of being professional educators also addresses the second of Shulman's (2001, 2) Ps: pragmatic responsibility "to discover, to connect, to apply and to teach." Acting as a journal editor and/or a manuscript reviewer positions professional educators to pass on to our peers what we "discover, discern and experience" as we strive to ensure and support others in ensuring that our work as educators "is constantly improving and meeting its objectives and its responsibilities to students" (Shulman 2001, 3). All stakeholders—authors, reviewers, and editors—have the professional interest to learn from their involvement in peer review (Friberg et al. 2021) and the pragmatic responsibility to reflect on and improve their work (Brookfield 2017). Through these activities, educators contribute to the enhancement of teaching and learning across the sector. The problem comes when those processes reinforce a narrow band of what counts as knowledge and dehumanize those involved, both through this exclusion and the process of reproducing it.

This work is set in the context of broader policy pressures—Shulman's (2001, 2) third P: "the capacity to respond to the legitimate questions of legislatures, boards and the increasingly robust demands of a developing market for higher education." Both implicitly and explicitly, policy articulates how academic rigor is defined, including expectations around "blind" peer review being the "gold standard" in publishing (Enslin and Hedge 2018), which, as noted above, begins to look less shiny when put "under the bright lights of real-world social processes" (Babin and Guidry Moulard 2018, 150). The notion of accountability perpetuated by these processes is suspect (Overall 2015). In peer review, the pragmatic responsibility to improve understanding and practice and the policy demand to meet certain notions of accountability both feed into and evolve through the professionalism of publishing as part of SoTL practice.

In the early years of SoTL, the need for a certain kind of "rigorous" peer review (professionalism and pragmatism) was integral to addressing the three Ps because of the skepticism regarding the legitimacy of the practice (policy pressures). The specter of seeming "lesser" and the pressures of scholarly publishing persist in many contexts, complicated by a growing awareness of the danger and harm of reproducing the inequities that permeate higher education in general and publishing in particular. For these reasons, we revisit the concept of rigor as we rethink the professional and pragmatic principles of SoTL in relation to peer review on the way, we hope, to reshaping policy with a move toward transparency, as Chick (2024) models, and answering more general calls for greater equity and inclusion in higher education.

## ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical framework we offer informs our relational model of peer review—a developmental model (Hutchings 2000) that identifies and promotes inclusive and humane practices. We begin by reviewing traditional notions of rigor, encouraging a reconceptualization of these, before integrating recent scholarship on the emotional experience of receiving feedback into our reconception.

### Academic rigor

Rigor is defined as "being extremely thorough and careful" (Google Oxford Languages 2024). In academic publishing, this means being thoughtful in identifying criteria for what should and should not be published. These criteria often reproduce narrow and exclusive conceptions of knowledge and forms of analysis (Yahlnaaw 2019). West and Rich (2012) state that academic rigor in journal publishing involves critical reviews and discernment about what is accepted. Implicit here is an understanding of rigor in publishing as analogous to rigor in teaching: "highly challenging, inflexible curriculum" (Brooks and McGurk 2022) inattentive to the inequities embedded in assumptions about access, ability, and effort (Nelson 2010).

In this context, rigor is often associated with anonymity: decisions on the "quality" of a manuscript are often determined through double-blind peer review by experienced peers and editors (West and Rich 2012). Publication in a "rigorous journal lends credibility and acceptance to the research because it indicates that the author(s) have successfully persuaded expert scholars of the merits of the article" (West and Rich 2012, 365). However,

this process relies heavily on the perspectives of one or two people who may, consciously or unconsciously, be acting, in the reviewing realm, on what Nelson (2010) labeled as "dysfunctional illusions of rigor" within the teaching realm. While heavily quantitative research grounded in positivist epistemologies might benefit from the double-blind review process, context plays an important role in teaching and learning investigations. Transparency or knowledge of the positions of both the reviewers and the authors can bring authenticity and meaning to the writing.

Many authors comment on the "Reviewer 2" phenomenon (Chick 2024)—where the first reviewer affirms the merit of their paper, and the second is highly critical and does not see the paper as ready for publication, and so the editor elects to reject the submission. Reviewer 2 "represents the harshest and most critical reviewer among a manuscript's evaluators" (George 2023, no page). Often, Reviewer 2 makes inaccurate assumptions and claims about the author's identity and knowledge (Abbot 2024). The anonymity afforded Reviewer 2 through the double-blind review process enables criticality without accountability. Therefore, in a double-blinded "rigorous" review, the author generally has to persuade potentially highly critical others of the quality of their work. Rigor in this context might be defined as a benchmark of quality determined by experts in the field, which authors need to achieve to be publishable but which may reproduce narrow notions of quality, relevance, and import as well as exclude the work of a diversity of scholars (Cook-Sather et al. 2020).

There are alternative ways in which we might conceive of rigorous peer review. Brooks and McGurk (2022) argue that by adopting more inclusive and equitable classroom practices, we are raising the rigor of participants' learning. We apply this classroom-focused argument to the peer-review process. True inclusion, Brooks and McGurk (2022) assert, "necessitates rigor to empower all students to grow, build on their strengths, and learn," and rigor, they contend, "is not simply hard for the sake of being hard, but it is purposeful and transparent." Similar to Nelson's (2010) revisions of his "dysfunctional illusions of rigor" regarding his classroom practice and "a revised notion of rigor in scholarly writing [that can make] SoTL-focused publications—and the practice of this scholarship—more inclusive" (Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten. 2019, 16), a revision of rigor in the review process focuses on the building of relationships. It also enhances the emotional learning needs and wellbeing of authors, reviewers, and editors.

## Emotions and wellbeing

Receiving feedback on written work is often an emotional experience (Rowe 2017), and the emotional aspect of learning is an "essential part of the thinking process" (Felten, Gilchrist, and Darby 2006, 41). Peer-review feedback through academic publishing is no different (Chick 2024). We can recognize that, like our students when they receive feedback, our own receipt of comments from an external reviewer can be experienced as "a complicated form of social interaction, in which factors such as power, discourse, identity and emotion may come into play" (Ryan and Henderson 2018, 881).

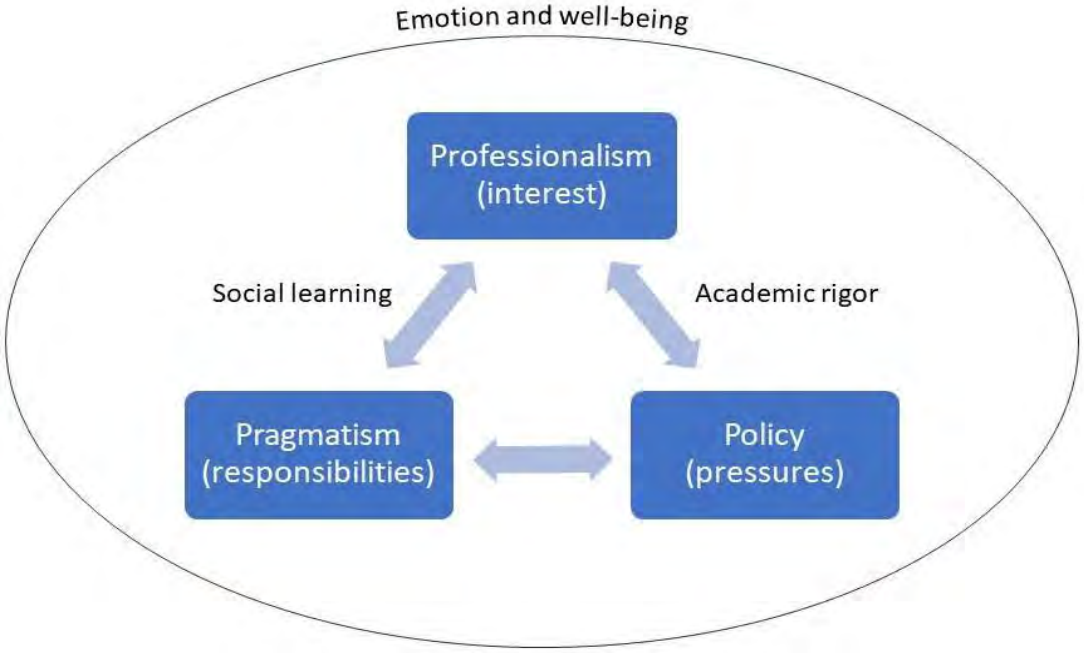
However, in contrast to most feedback experiences in other areas of academia, the person receiving and the person providing the feedback are usually anonymous to one another through a "double-blind peer review" (Taylor and Francis 2023) meant to provide greater objectivity with less risk of conscious or unconscious bias on the piece of work (PAEditorial 2021). Complementing acknowledgments that peer review is in fact subjective (Chick 2024), the literature on emotions and feedback to students recognizes the integral link between emotions, cognition, and motivation in learning (Hill et al. 2023; Pekrun 2019). Feedback detached from the inherent emotions it elicits may come across as uncaring and decrease the motivation of the recipient to develop their work (Ryan and Henderson 2018; Winstone et al. 2017).

Consequently, researchers have argued for the adoption of relational and partnership approaches to feedback in order to increase positive emotions and success (Hill et al. 2021a; Hill et al. 2021b; Matthews et al. 2024). Social learning builds a sense of community, engagement, and belonging for students and staff (Masika and Jones 2016). Developing relationships in a community of practice enhances individual learning through mutual support (McDonald and Cater-Steel 2017). A review process that is distanced, detached, and anonymous does not offer the opportunities to build such learning relationships and therefore limits possible learning as well as excluding many people from those learning opportunities. Rather than perpetuating peer review as a gatekeeping mechanism that authors struggle to get through or are excluded by, we might instead prioritize positive emotions and wellbeing, coupled with a reconceptualization of rigor, to affirm a greater diversity of authors through building relationships that enhance the learning of all involved and produce quality outputs, with quality more expansively defined.

## A relational model of peer review

As depicted in Figure 1, a relational model of peer review supports a developmental process (Hutchings 2000) that resituates Shulman's three Ps. As part of an approach to peer review that enacts and encourages an evolving understanding of how social learning develops both professionalism and pragmatism, this model is premised on a reconceptualized definition of academic rigor and is encircled by attention to the emotions and wellbeing of all concerned (authors, reviewers, and editors).

Figure 1. A relational publishing process




## TWO EXAMPLES OF STRIVING FOR TRANSPARENCY AND INCLUSION THROUGH A RELATIONAL REVIEW PROCESS

Below we offer two examples of how *IJSaP* has endeavored to create structures and practices that support greater transparency and inclusion. The relational review process illustrated by these examples unfolds, in the first instance, in relation to the anonymous peer review of empirical research articles and, in the second instance, through an open, non-anonymous, dialogic peer review of reflective essays.

### Developing *IJSaP* submission guidelines and supporting new reviewers

*IJSaP* is a developmental journal focused on "students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education" (*IJSaP* 2024). This involves several stakeholders including students, academics, and professional staff (*IJSaP* 2024). Since its inception, the journal has been structured around international (initially Australian, Canadian, UK, and US) editorial teams consisting of a staff member and a student, with every submission peer reviewed by a student and staff member (Cliffe et al. 2017; Healey, Healey, and Cliffe 2018). Embracing student involvement in editing and reviewing meant that, unlike other journals, *IJSaP* would work with a significant proportion of people who did not have prior reviewing experience. Importantly, we recognized that staff may also be inexperienced reviewers, and therefore we needed to construct support around reviewing experience, rather than academic role. Consequently, in 2016, as the call for submissions for the first issue went out, Healey and her student partner, Anthony Cliffe, were tasked with developing training and support for reviewers.

### *Stage 1: Training the trainers*

Our first task was to align the editorial board. This included exploring what would be the *IJSaP* thresholds for publication, alongside the content and style of a "good" *IJSaP* peer review. We approached this task by undertaking a calibration exercise. This exercise started with the identification of a recently published research article on students as partners and undertook a mock-review exercise of it as if it were a submission to *IJSaP*. Each co-editor, including the two of us, completed a review proforma. The proforma was split into four main feedback sections for the author(s): 1) a free-text box asking for an overview paragraph stating initial impressions of the paper; 2) a list of key criteria accepted research articles should address (as agreed by the board) which could be graded from "Not at all" to "A lot" (Table 1); 3) a free-text box on the specific strengths of the paper (noting to focus points in relation to the criteria); and 4) a free-text box for advice on the specific areas for enhancement.

**Table 1.** Research article criteria rubric

| **Criteria**<br>**Research articles must address the following broad criteria for inclusion. Please indicate with an "x" next to each element the extent to which you consider they have addressed that element.** | **Not at all** | **A little** | **Somewhat** | **A lot** | **Not applicable** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Implications for students as partners are explicitly stated | | | | | |
| Achieves the aim(s) set out in the paper (e.g. alignment between aims, research approach, discussion, conclusion) | | | | | |
| Research design and methods are appropriate and conducted ethically | | | | | |
| Presents original ideas or results supported by evidence, argument and reference to existing literature | | | | | |
| Is well written and accessible to an international readership | | | | | |

Once all the reviews were submitted, we compiled the anonymous feedback into one completed proforma for the paper. This was circulated to the editorial board in advance of a meeting where we discussed the feedback, exploring similarities and differences. From this process, we confirmed expectations for publications in *IJSaP* and what we considered to be good practice in writing peer reviews. We then repeated the process on a second paper to continue to clarify the editorial board's vision for an *IJSaP* review. This phase included making changes to the reviewer proforma and writing separate criteria for the different genres (e.g., case studies, reflective essays, and opinion pieces).

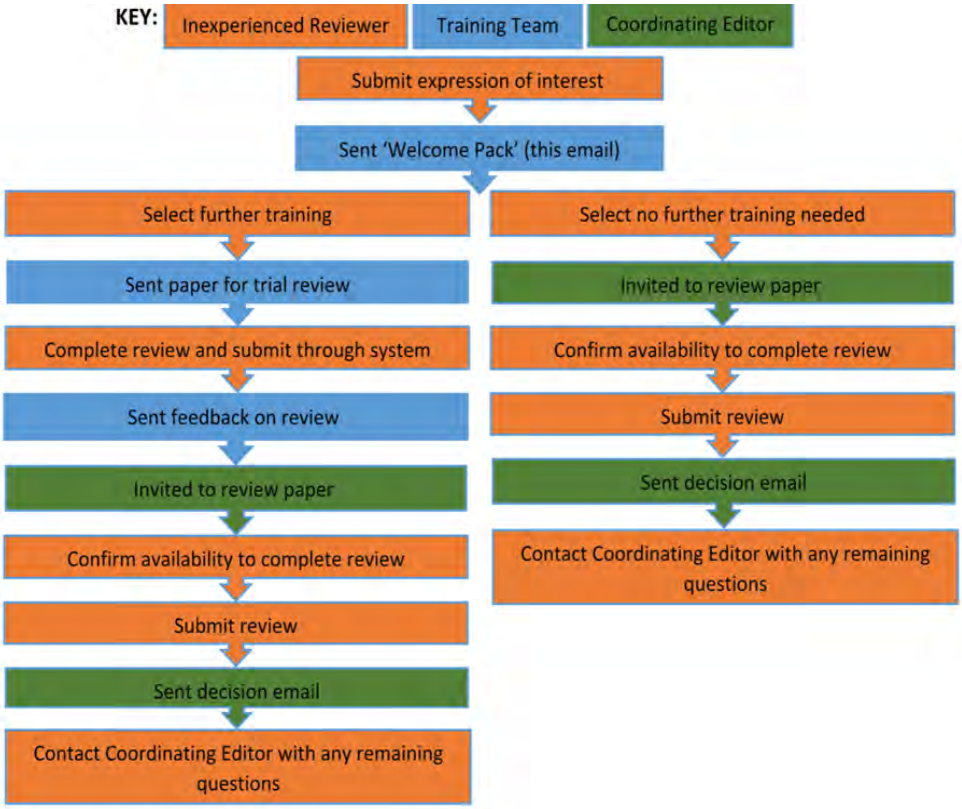
### *Stage 2: Training inexperienced reviewers*

The next stage considered how we could train and support inexperienced reviewers to provide developmental reviews for our authors. Since including large numbers of students in all stages of the publication process was novel, we were uncertain of the extent to which any training we put in place would be needed. All the co-editors work for the journal voluntarily, and as such it was essential to ensure that any model adopted was both manageable and sustainable. Therefore, an initial individual approach to training was dismissed. After several drafts and nuanced iterations, we eventually developed a two-part, resource-based training process for all reviewers to engage with when they registered to review for the journal. Part 1: When a new reviewer joins the journal, they are sent a "Welcome email." This message includes a link to the "Reviewer welcome pack" that includes:

1. an example of the review process from submission to publication demonstrating how authors were supported by the reviewers and editors (this includes the original manuscript, the original review, a response from the authors regarding how they addressed the reviewers' comments, and the final manuscript)[1]
2. a question-and-answer document about the review process, and
3. a flow diagram of the further training options for inexperienced reviewers (Figure 2).

While these resources are primarily aimed at inexperienced reviewers, they may provide experienced reviewers guidance on the *IJSaP* ethos and expectations. Most reviewers only engage with part 1, but part 2 is available for reviewers who would like further training. Part 2 invites reviewers to work through the left-hand side of the flow diagram and undertake a "trial review." The authors of one of the published papers we had used in the mock-review kindly agreed for us to use their paper in this training exercise and provided a pre-published Word version of their manuscript. Based on the discussions with the editorial board about our expectations for *IJSaP* reviews, we developed illustrative "good" and "less good" reviews for the paper, enabling inexperienced reviewers to undertake a mock review and then receive feedback based on our compiled reviews of the paper. Whether reviewers undertake further training or not, all reviewers are sent a copy of the final editorial decision and copy of the anonymous feedback from both reviewers.

Figure 2. Training options available for inexperienced reviewers




Turning from this relational review in the context of anonymous peer review of research articles, we focus in the next section on how we have developed an open, non-anonymous, dialogic peer review approach for reflective essays.

## Developing guidelines for open review of reflective essays

We launched *IJSaP* with a commitment to valuing multiple forms of analysis, including reflective essays, which were less common in scholarly journals at that time. Since 2010, Cook-Sather had been publishing a non-peer-reviewed journal, *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, dedicated to the reflective essay genre, and she argued for the inclusion of reflective essays in *IJSaP* as a way to legitimate this genre through peer review. There were challenges, though, first in a non-traditional genre being offered by the journal and, second, in moving from non-peer review to peer review of the genre, particularly because it was a new way of writing for many authors. These challenges persist, as Cruz and her co-authors (2024) report in "a review of journal publishing practices related to reflective writing in SoTL," the subtitle of their article titled "Practice What We Preach?"

We included clear criteria for reflective essay authors on the *IJSaP* website, emphasizing the distinctions between this genre and others. For instance, we specified that essays should be written in the first person, focus on lived experiences and critical analysis of those experiences, and include only a small number of citations of existing literature, as needed. (Appendix A shows full criteria.) We also offered the guidelines developed for all *IJSaP* reviews, which emphasized the developmental commitment of the journal.

Nevertheless, some reviewers fell back on standard assumptions about published work, critiquing reflective essays for the absence of components of other genres (e.g., review of relevant literature). In addition, we noticed a lack of attention to the emotional experience an author might have upon receiving this feedback and critique of their analysis of lived experiences. Cruz and colleagues (2024) report similar findings.

Noting parallels between conventions in SoTL and Nelson's (2010) arguments against "dysfunctional illusions of rigor" in teaching, Cook-Sather and two colleagues offered "five affirmative reasons why reflection should be embraced as a legitimate, rigorous, and necessary mode of writing" (Cook-Sather et al. 2019, 15; see also Cruz, Grodziak, and Steiner 2024). Prior to Brooks and McGurk's (2022) redefinition of rigor as an inclusive practice, faculty who had written reflective essays offered insight into what such a redefinition might entail. For example, one faculty author wrote:

> As a scientist by training, I had no time, education, or inclination to prepare a rigorous academic treatise on my experiences in the classroom; but the reflective genre allowed me to share the experiences and ideas generated by [my pedagogical partnership with a student] with a wide academic audience who may benefit from these insights. (Cook-Sather et al. 2019, 20)

To address the mismatch between the journal's developmental goals and some of the submitted reflective essay reviews alongside the possible harm to authors this disparity might cause, we proposed to the editorial board the idea of creating an open-review process. Cook-Sather suggested the use of shared Google Docs, a forum she has used in her teaching to create a sense of community, shared accountability, and affirmation of the human (Cook-Sather and Lesnick 2023; Cook-Sather and Nguyen 2023). Another member of the editorial board, Amrita Kaur, a scientist by training like the faculty member quoted above, was enthusiastic about this approach. As she writes in a reflective essay about her experience of serving as faculty co-editor of the reflective essay section of *IJSaP*, Kaur had been trained through her doctoral work in psychology to use the third person to write empirical articles that rely heavily on quantitative evidence. This previous experience stood in sharp contrast to an experience where she was encouraged "to write personally and grow through reflection" (Kaur forthcoming) for a collection of experiences of pedagogical partnership (Cook-Sather and Wilson 2020). This encouragement made her first experience with reflective writing "a treasured experience" (Kaur forthcoming).

We were inspired by Kaur's personally fulfilling experience of reflective writing. This experience inspired her, in turn, to create similarly meaningful experiences for other authors and to change academic culture. Kaur (forthcoming) explained:

> 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 (even dehumanizes) the people involved.

Following the editorial board conversation about piloting an open-review process, Cook-Sather worked with Kaur and her student co-editor to develop a set of process guidelines. We summarize below the main components of those guidelines in the order in which we would recommend others act on them.

- State clearly on the journal website (a) the criteria for reflective essays and (b) that the journal uses an open-review process for non-anonymized submitted essays.
- Identify a pool of potential reviewers and ask them if they are ready to engage in a non-anonymized, dialogic, and developmental review process that includes engaging in one or more rounds of offering constructive and considerate, non-anonymized feedback on a sharing platform.
- Share the detailed guidelines for reviewing reflective essays with those who agree to participate.
- Engage in a pre-review of proposals for reflective essays, including offering guidance on the focus, content, and style of this genre and preparing authors for the dialogic review process.
- Once reviewers and proposals are both identified, create a shared document with the manuscript, send the review template to reviewers, and send an email message to introduce authors and reviewers that includes a tentative timeline document link.
- Throughout the process, journal editors monitor the progress, send reminders, add comments on the document as needed, and decide when the review process is complete.

We also offer reviewers further guidelines for engaging in the open-review process. Once they agree to review a reflective essay submission to *IJSaP*, reviewers receive a message that reminds them of the developmental nature of the journal and the particular vulnerability authors of reflective essays may experience. In addition, we offer suggestions for engaging in the open-review process that acknowledge the "complicated form of social interaction, in which factors such as such as power, discourse, identity and emotion may come into play" (Ryan and Henderson 2018, 881) and strive to increase positive emotions and success (Hill et al. 2021b; Matthews et al. 2024). For instance, we suggest that reviewers include at the top of the document some general comments to affirm the authors' efforts, noting specifically what they as reviewers appreciate about the draft and how it could contribute to *IJSaP*. We also recommend concluding with a summary of main points of appreciation and suggested revision (see Appendix B for recommendations).

To further guide a review process that is attentive to the emotional experience of authors, we offer some "sentence starters." Some of these are keyed to journal aims ("This essay seems like a good fit for *IJSaP* because. . ."). Others are keyed to reflective essay

criteria, such as to analyze rather than simply describe ("Can you say something about the why?; just stating that you did something does not help readers understand why or how they might follow your lead"). Still others help reviewers acknowledge the emotional experience of writing reflective essays and the emotional experience of receiving feedback ("I respect how candid you are in sharing this point. It will really help readers understand. . ."). Appendix B includes the full set of sentence starters.

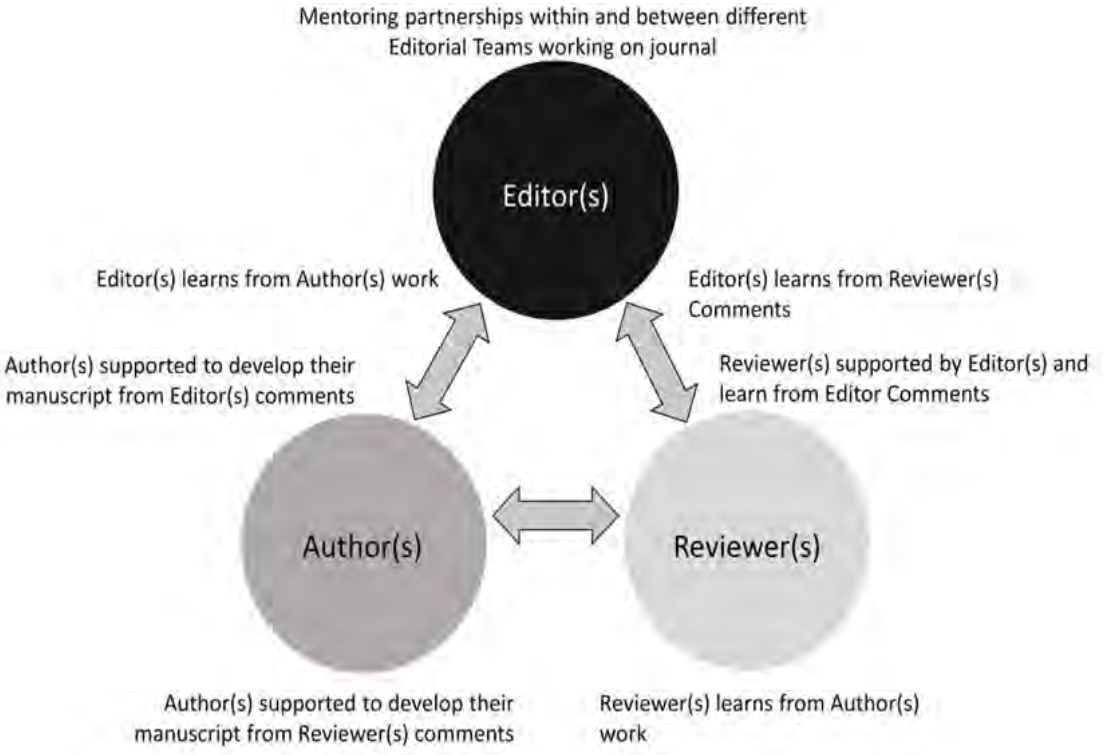
We have decided to embrace this approach as the reflective essay review default, but with the option for authors to choose the previous anonymized version if they are uncomfortable with open dialogic review. We also must accept that some reviewers may feel uncomfortable with this process and turn down the request to review.

## DISCUSSION

Our relational review model for *IJSaP* adapts Shulman's (2001) three Ps for peer review. For us, professionalism means meeting "the inherent obligations and opportunities associated with becoming a professional scholar/educator" (Shulman 2001, 2) through connecting and humanizing—in short, through making practice personal as well as professional. This means paying attention to emotional as well as intellectual aspects of publishing (Hill et al. 2023).

We re-understand pragmatism—"the activities needed to ensure that one's work as an educator is constantly improving and meeting its objectives and its responsibilities to students" (Shulman 2001, 2)—as a commitment to providing structures and guidelines so that all involved in the review process continue to grow and deepen capacity. Here, too, we attend to the emotional, because it is difficult to continue to engage in a process, and particularly hard to learn from it, if that process is harmful. Consistent with Friberg et al.'s (2021) argument that "supporting others to develop their writing for publication is a form of mentoring" (400), we also integrate mentoring into our understanding of pragmatism and the reciprocal ways authors, reviewers, and editors learn from one another through the review process (Figure 3). This process is limited in the context of anonymized peer review but is well supported by the approaches we have developed.

Figure 3. The reciprocal learnings between stakeholders within the journal




Source: Friberg et al. (2021, 401).

Finally, in relation to policy—"the capacity to respond to the legitimate questions of legislatures, boards and the increasingly robust demands of a developing market for higher education" (Shulman 2001, 2)—we apply to peer review Brooks and McGurk's (2022) argument for resolving the false dichotomy between rigor and inclusivity: (1) rigor, when defined apart from a deficit ideology, is necessary for greater inclusivity; (2) inadequate definitions of rigor produce poorer outcomes, particularly for those underrepresented and/or underserved; and (3) rigor is not simply hard for the sake of being hard, but it is purposeful and transparent. In both examples, our relational model enacts transparency and inclusivity, building on this revision and integration of SoTL rationales.

In generating guidelines for the anonymous peer review of articles, we noted that student involvement throughout the editing and reviewing process meant working with a significant proportion of people without reviewing experience. From the beginning, this approach recognized that students had capacity to expand their knowledge and experience of the review process. Similarly, our choice to design resources for reviewing around experience, rather than role, aimed to challenge traditional notions of capacity, typically understood as role hierarchy rather than experience spectrum.

In training the trainers, we explored the threshold standard for publication in *IJSaP*, alongside the content and style of a "good" *IJSaP* peer review. This exploration accepted as a starting point that standards are dynamic, a dialogue between forms of expression and support for achieving those. The process we discussed of training the trainers focused on

identifying what we were looking for in submissions and what we considered to be good practice in writing peer reviews, firming up the editorial board's vision for an *IJSaP* review, and making changes to the reviewer proforma and writing separate criteria for the different genres. This iterative process, while focused primarily on developing review process guidelines, also signals the developmental commitment of the journal (Hutchings 2000) and an awareness of the emotional experiences of all involved. In our discussion of training inexperienced reviewers, we noted that, because co-editors undertake the journal work voluntarily, it was essential to ensure any adopted model was both manageable and sustainable. While the resources we created are primarily aimed at inexperienced reviewers, they also provide experienced reviewers guidance on the *IJSaP* ethos and expectations. This aspect of our process is about transparency and the recognition that everyone benefits from it.

In relation to the open-review process for reflective essays, we suggest that having clear statements of criteria for and processes of review on the journals' website and offering criteriafocused feedback throughout the review process make explicit what is expected (transparency) and make meeting the criteria more achievable, regardless of previous experience or cultural capital (inclusion). Likewise, our recommendation that reviewers offer affirmation both at the start and end of the review helps reassure authors that reviewers are attentive to the emotional investment of this work and informs their reception and integration of the feedback. Providing "sentence starters" scaffolds this process for reviewers.

The principle of non-anonymous review that underlies this approach creates a distinct environment for learning through peer review. By establishing the identity of both parties, we remove the distance often felt between author and reviewer, humanizing each to the other, and we recognize the individuals involved as vulnerable both in receiving and in giving feedback. The power hierarchy between the reviewer, who could offer unfair critique with no fear of repercussions due to their anonymity, and the author is removed; instead, the reviewer becomes a "critical friend" with responsibility to the author and for the review process. The review process then becomes not only one of developing the essay, but also of building a relationship. This reflective and collegial space attends to the emotional experiences of both the author and reviewer.

The benefits Kaur (forthcoming) identifies of this open and dialogic approach to reviewing reflective essays include the creation of a community and advocacy for peer review practices that are transparent, developmental, and supportive. The challenges include recruitment of suitable reviewers, power imbalances between students and faculty/staff during the review process, and the potential for the platform to be less inclusive than it aims to be.

## IMPLICATIONS

Two key implications of our relational model for peer review center on time and power. These are particularly relevant for a journal focused on partnership, since these issues have been widely discussed in the literature (Ollis and Gravett 2020). However, they have

implications for any editors, reviewers, and authors who want to engage in more relational review processes for SoTL and non-SoTL topics.

## Time

These approaches take time to develop and engage with, but as in all contexts, how people experience time differs. In developing guidelines for anonymous peer-review of articles, we felt that the time invested up front would save time later through greater clarity and the avoidance of additional review rounds—a logic that has an analogy in rationales for the investment of time in student-faculty/staff partnership (Cook-Sather 2024; Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014). In addition, we hoped that the time invested would signal a level of attention and care for those involved in our review processes, which would inspire them to invest similar levels of care and attention. The appreciative feedback we have received from reviewers and authors suggests this might be the case. For instance, one *IJSaP* reviewer wrote: "I really appreciate the resources for reviewers that you've set up. It's a great model which I wish more journals would consider." Regarding the reviews received from the journal, one author (2017) wrote: "I have never received such constructive, detailed, and helpful feedback and wanted to say thank you for the time spent on this to help develop the work."

For the reflective essay open-review process, we hoped that inviting asynchronous engagement would "help overcome time zone differences of the members involved and offer flexibility for time commitments" (Kaur, forthcoming). However, Kaur (forthcoming) notes that the open-review process is "both time intensive and energy-consuming." In contrast, Cook-Sather found the open-review process to feel less time consuming because it was more enjoyable, dynamic, and engaging. As Healey has noted, it may take more time to get one's mind and heart back into the open-review process, to be present to it, but then one might feel more invested, engaged, and committed to the process, so the time spent feels less onerous. There are important questions of quality and continuity of engagement which we do not address in this paper, but rather invite further dialogue as part of an exploration of relational review processes. Thus far, however, the feedback has been positive. For example, one staff author wrote:

> We found the open review process very helpful and collegial. [My student co-author] and I had a chance to discuss how this approach is fairly novel within academic publishing (another "hidden" feature of academia that students don't often get to see). We really appreciate the way *IJSaP* enacts partnership principles in the way that it works.

A student author offered similar positive feedback directly to a reviewer: "Thank you so much for your detailed feedback on our reflection. I enjoyed taking our piece a step further by including more examples and adding depth. Your time, detailed observations, and insightful feedback are greatly appreciated!" A faculty and student co-author pair wrote that "the generous feedback . . . honoured our experience and gave us much to think about as we try to tell the story of this experience in a way that will be meaningful for readers." These

direct exchanges, some on the Google Docs themselves, are examples of this approach's humanizing process.

### Power

An anonymized review process that lacks transparency and strives to exclude, rather than include, works to keep power in the hands of already established scholars and is guided by their values. This notion of "standards" serves to keep in place what has been deemed quality—a code, often, for refusal to diversify. The partnership spirit of *IJSaP* extends to how we conceptualize quality, but that does not mean that power dynamics disappear. In the case of research articles, the effort to make review criteria transparent creates possibilities for rethinking standards but does not guarantee it. In the case of the open-review process for reflective essays, power might feel more shared, but the lack of anonymity might make those with less power in the role hierarchy feel more vulnerable.

Kaur (forthcoming) identifies two sides of this complexity. On the one hand, she notes that, while we have not gathered empirical data on this question, "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 partnership." On the other hand, Kaur (forthcoming) reflects:

> 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.

These concerns could also apply to faculty who are more vulnerable (e.g., do not have tenure or are on a fixed term contract). On the other hand, there may also be a positive bias towards leading scholars (e.g., If this was written by Professor X, it must be good, even if I don't understand it). No faculty or student authors have expressed these concerns to date, but they are possible within a hierarchical system that more often conceptualizes power as over rather than with.

We hope that this article and recent analyses, such as Chick's (2024) and Cruz, Grodziak, and Steiner's (2024), will inspire the SoTL field to continue to grapple with how we can enact and support greater transparency and inclusion as part of developing equitable and inclusive review practices.

## NOTES

1. With the permission of the authors, we originally used an example from a different journal, changing this to an article that had been accepted in *IJSaP* later on.

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

*Alison Cook-Sather (USA) is Mary Katharine Woodworth professor of education at Bryn Mawr College. She has published 10 books and over 160 other works on student-faculty pedagogical partnership, and she has consulted in 13 countries on this practice.*

*Ruth L. Healey (GBR) is a professor of learning and teaching and a University Innovation Fellow at the University of Chester and a director of Healey HE Consultants. She was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship in 2017.*

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## APPENDIX A: REVIEW CRITERIA FOR REFLECTIVE ESSAYS

- Illuminate the day-to-day practicalities of pedagogical partnership and/or insights gained into the potential of such collaboration in higher education.
- Situate the focal practice for a broad readership: provide necessary details of context and of the project or practice so readers across contexts can understand.
- Refrain or limit from presenting too much information on the content and outcomes of the projects in which they were engaged, focusing instead on the experience of partnership.
- Explicitly discuss the partnership experience, process, and implications of the work for partnership.
- Convey to readers the particulars of partnership, in terms of experiences and insights, rather than assume familiarity with or understanding of partnership and how it can unfold.
- Show as opposed to tell: offer vivid, detailed examples instead of simply stating that something happened.
- Treat their own lived experiences as data for analysis.
- Analyze as much as describe: offer explanations and interpretations rather than assuming examples speak for themselves.
- Dig deeply into analyses: make assumptions explicit, clearly articulate insights and conclusions, and make connections across points.
- Speak with, not for, others: co-reflect and co-author rather than only using quotes, and if co-authoring is not an option, be sure to capture multiple perspectives/voices rather than letting some voices to be 'louder' than others.
- Keep writings personal and write an informal, first-person account of the lived experience of partnership.
- Include a small number of citations of existing literature but stay light on citations.

We also provide the following link to a chapter that offers further discussion of and guidelines for writing reflective essays: https://www.centerforengagedlearning.org/books/writing-about-learning/part-4/chapter-18/.

## APPENDIX B: GUIDELINES FOR REVIEWERS OF REFLECTIVE ESSAYS

Dear <reviewers>

Thank you once again for agreeing to engage in an open, developmental, and dialogic review of the reflective essay titled "<title>," submitted to *International Journal for Students as Partners (IJSaP)*.

As you know, reflective essays are personal and a unique genre of writing. They require careful stewardship through the review process. We see this not as a competitive or weeding-out process; rather, it is a developmental and supportive one. The review criteria are consistent with what authors are asked to incorporate while writing a reflective essay for *IJSaP*. Those are pasted at the end of this email to guide your review.

There are a few technical points we would like you to take note of:

- Please turn on the "Suggesting" mode in Google Doc so that everyone can see the suggestions and the changes being proposed/made.

- Please include editors if you establish any communications with authors via email.

While you review the essay, we request that you, as Reviewer:

- Include at the top of the Google Doc some general comments to authors that affirm their efforts, noting specifically what you appreciate about the draft and how it could contribute to *IJSaP*.
- Affirm/validate the lived experience described in the piece using the "Comments" function throughout the essay.
- Also using the "Comment" function, offer appreciation of what the authors convey clearly and powerfully; be specific about what you appreciate and why.
- Pose questions in your "Comments"—ask for clarification, more detail in the examples, greater depth of analysis—as needed and indicate why such detail would be helpful to readers. Please be sure to specify why you are suggesting a particular revision—why will it help readers?
- Suggest specific ways the author can revise to achieve greater clarity, detail, and depth.
- Finally, provide a summary of main points of appreciation and suggested revision at the end of the Google Doc to pull together the points you have made.

We also provide a few "sentence starters" and model questions that you may want to use while reviewing:

- This essay seems like a good fit for *IJSaP* because…
- The experiences you discuss here are compelling because…
- I really appreciated this point because…
- I respect how candid you are in sharing this point. It will really help readers understand…
- While I can see that it's important to include some description here, I wonder if readers would benefit from more analysis to help them understand…
- While it's important to give readers context, might you be able to offer more detail here of how this experience felt to you?
- Can you say something about the why? Just stating that you did something does not help readers understand why or how they might follow your lead.
- Can you be more detailed/specific about the process? What was the process and what did it feel like?
- How did you deal with XXX? What did you learn from it, and how did it inform your partnership work?

Finally, we provide screenshots of an example of the open-review process that has already been completed for you to view what this dialogic process may look like.