EDITORIAL

Editorial: Reimagining the Global Research Table

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Abstract

A recent update of *Gateways'* website text prompted reflections by the Editorial Committee on what the journal has and hasn't achieved and potential next steps. This Editorial is offered as a speculative musing on the metaphor of the 'global research table', which has helped frame our understanding of the contribution an academic journal may make to the field of community-based research. As with any metaphor, there is more than one interpretation, and the discussion highlights both the risks and imaginative potential of working towards institutional change, together.

Keywords

Community-Based Research; Journal Editors; Global Research Table

Introduction

The Editorial Committee of *Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement* recently decided to examine our journal website text, to see what might need updating or revising. What began as a sort of mild 'refresh', however, ended up generating more reflection and scrutiny than anticipated. This was partly due to an emerging appreciation that many of our original goals and sense of purpose remained steady – prompting discussion on what the journal has, and hasn't, achieved in its 14 years of publishing community-based research. A second, related issue centred more broadly on the role and place of an academic

journal within a global diverse movement seeking profound social, intellectual and institutional change (Hall & Tandon 2021). As we reflected on the journal's purpose and focus, articulated in a few brief paragraphs in English on our website, it became clear that what we were exploring was an understanding of the journal *as* community-based methodology. That is, an institutional space that does not just disseminate engaged research but is itself engaged. What does that mean, what could or should that look like? This Editorial is offered as a way to continue and deepen those musings with our valued collaborators of authors, readers and reviewers.

Gateways Journal: A Brief Overview

Community-university engagement has been described as 'one of the major innovations' of higher education over the past few decades (O'Meara et al. 2011, p. 84). The establishment of *Gateways* journal is just one example of the enormous burst of activity that has occurred over that time, during which many journals, networks, partnerships and organisations have been created to support and further the field (Fitzgerald et al. 2019). *Gateways'* practices, processes and outcomes can shed light on the wider movement. To do so, this Editorial draws on data generated by our publisher, UTS ePress, and previous Editorials written by the Editorial Committee, as well as the website text. Since its founding in 2008, *Gateways'* Editorial Committee has contributed two Editorials (others have been authored by guest editors); this is our third. Not many, perhaps, but this can make it is easier to see changes and consistencies.

Our inaugural Editorial in Volume 1 (2008) established the journal's core purpose: to publish 'articles based on research that is the result of actively engaged research-practitioner collaborative projects, has the potential for informing community-based activities or developing understanding of community engagement' (Nyden et al. 2008, p. 1). This remains true today, with the website 'Journal summary' reiterating our commitment to support an 'emerging global movement of collaborative, critical and change-oriented community-university research initiatives'. Necessarily, this first Editorial was concerned with establishing the legitimacy of its purpose. It asserted the scholarly credibility and social urgency of substantive community involvement in thoroughgoing, competent evidence-based research and its peer-reviewed communication and dissemination. Such involvement *improved* research.

The next Editorial argued even more strongly for rigorous collaboration, noting the growing presence of 'insidious forces' attacking independent thinking and research, 'particularly the activist, community-engaged, change-oriented science produced by participatory research' (Nyden, Ashton & O'Loughlin, 2017, p. 5). The authors continued: '[c]ommunity-engaged research, which lies at the heart of *Gateways*, is a powerful antidote to the cult of ignorance and anti-science know-nothingism'. At the same time, contemporary universities themselves were beset by so many competing pressures, internal and external, that they risked developing a sort of split personality, 'a kind of Dr Jekyll writ large' (Nyden, Ashton & O'Loughlin 2017, p. 5).

Following on from the above core purpose, the journal's stated primary focus was (and is) on 'breaking down boundaries in producing and sharing knowledge' (Nyden et al. 2008, p. 1). A motivating starting place was to challenge 'the notion that community-based research is parochial', arguing instead that it 'can be a basic building block of regional, national and international research' (Nyden et al. 2008, p. 2). Indeed, by 2017, *Gateways'* second Editorial was able to note a growth in the literature, in multiple disciplines, that featured research collaborations bridging community-university divides, spanning international, national and regional borders, and connecting myriad groups at the local level. They wrote that articles in *Gateways* were not 'just reporting' on participatory research; they had the potential to 'produce direct links among members of this growing community … stimulate new ideas and seed new projects' (Nyden, Ashton & O'Loughlin 2017, p. 2). For these editors, the journal had 'succeeded in becoming a go-to source of information for grassroots activities across the globe' (Nyden, Ashton & O'Loughlin 2017, p. 3).

As a free open access journal, readers do not need to register with *Gateways*, which limits what we can know about them. It is clear, however, from data on the use and reach of articles published by *Gateways* that the community of engaged scholars and practitioners is indeed global, diverse and growing. Digital technologies, used purposively, undoubtedly make a difference. Our introduction of HTML accessibility in 2014 resulted in a sharp increase in downloads (prior to that, only PDF was available). By 2021, full text download figures for the year (PDF and HTML) were 32,196, with readers from nearly every country. Articles are not only read but used – 75.14% of all published articles have been cited, with a mean citation figure of 3.46 per article. In addition, 56.07% of articles have received altmetric 'attention' (Source: UTS ePress, 24 September 2021. Download figures from COUNTER; citations data from Dimensions; altmetric attention scores from Altmetrics.)

The strong and sustained global interest can be seen in the many volumes *Gateways* has published in partnership with universities or networks around the world, including from Canada, Hong Kong, South Africa, the Talloires Network, the UK and the USA. Our Advisory Board and Editorial Committee are similarly international in scope, as are peer referees. It is important to note, however, that recent analysis by this author (unpublished) has revealed that referees are disproportionally from the USA and Canada, when compared with submitting author-by-country profiles. A key future effort for the Editorial Committee, as well as guest editors, will be to address this imbalance, such as through more deliberate targeting of referees from beyond North America.

We know more about submitting authors. *Gateways*' top ten countries, by submitting author, from 2008–2019, are: USA, Canada, Australia, UK, South Africa, Kenya, New Zealand, Hong Kong, India and Malaysia (Source: UTS ePress, January 2020). Nearly 75% of all articles published by *Gateways* are co-authored. Of those, approximately one-third include community-based co-authors. We have only rarely received manuscripts with the community-based partner as the sole or lead author. Reflecting on this latter issue, from a primarily North American perspective, Lorilee R Sandmann (2019, p. xvii) has described contributions to the literature thus far by community partners as being 'woefully' rare. In the hope of encouraging a diversity of authors, *Gateways* was established from the outset with three different article sections (research, practice-based, snapshot) of different length and focus. We have seen these sections find their feet over time: students have sometimes utilised the snapshot section, as have scholars from the Global South; and the practice-based section is frequently used by academics often well established in their specific disciplines to comprehensively and frankly reflect on the 'craft' of community-based research.

We have discovered that community-based authors are just as likely to contribute to double-blind peer-reviewed research articles as the shorter, non-reviewed practice-based or snapshot articles. What our 14-year history makes very clear, however, is that the main factor that results in published articles featuring community-based co-authors (and/or postgraduate student co-authors) is collaboration. Directly connecting with others makes possible a more collective, shared and supported approach to research writing and dissemination, and *that* consistently encourages participation. A final observation: while there is an institutional emphasis on the value of peer-reviewed research articles, readers are more welcoming. In our top 20 articles by downloads (including Abstract views), two are practice-based, another two are snapshots and one is an Editorial (Source: *Gateways* OJS data, 14 May 2022).

Community-Based Research and the Global Research Table

Gateways has used the metaphor of the global research table throughout its history. Its conceptual and methodological terrain was established thus: 'In essence, *Gateways* seeks to add chairs at a global research table … We would like this journal to be a vehicle for expanding that research table to include experienced community voices. This can only strengthen the quality of research since it taps into knowledge and experience often not easily accessed by academic-based researchers' (Nyden et al. 2008, p. 4). In 2017, we

wrote that '*Gateways* has become an evidence-based global forum. Not only are community members at the "research table", but the community itself has become large, multi-faceted and international' (Nyden, Ashton & O'Loughlin 2017, p. 3). Today, the website's 'Focus and scope' explains that the intention behind the journal's different article sections is 'to fulfil two goals: one, to create space for more chairs at the research table; and two, to expand the research table itself. That is, not just more, but different.'

Reading them now together, these three statements form a mini history of the journal. Drawing from many discussions with my fellow Editorial Committee members, I want to use this metaphor as a prompt for a brief discussion of our work and evolving understanding of the contribution an academic journal can make to community-based research, as well as potential challenges and barriers. While clearly from our partial perspective, as a microcosm of the wider field, we hope these speculative reflections will be of interest to others.

In 2008, our Editorial used the idea of *adding* chairs to firmly counter the prevailing institutional notion that community-based research was not 'proper' research, marginal at best. Having scholarly, peer-reviewed journals in which university-based researchers could publish their community-based research was essential for the emerging field. As already shown, we took various concrete steps to help ensure that a diverse audience of authors and readers *could* draw up chairs to the 'global research table'. Most fundamentally, the journal was established as open access: free for readers and authors. This remains in clear contrast to the dominant for-profit publishing model in which, for example, 'roughly 85% of new research articles published globally' sit behind subscription-only paywalls (EUA 2022, p. 8). The significant commitment of the UTS Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion (formerly UTS Shopfront) and UTS ePress, our publisher, needs to be acknowledged here, as does that of our co-sponsors, the Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL), Loyola University; the Swearer Center, Brown University; and Albion College. Looking to the future, I am delighted to announce our new co-sponsor and partner: urbanCORE, at the University of North Carolina – Charlotte. More on this in future announcements.

By 2017, community members were at a global 'research table', forming part of a 'large, multi-faceted and international' community of practice. *Gateways*' publishing history provides ample evidence of the important intellectual work undertaken, involving all sorts of people, in all sorts of places, sitting around research tables located in community halls or kitchens or university seminar rooms. Further, it is clear that this work is of significant interest to others working at their own variously located and constructed research tables. As I reflected on the metaphor, however, it struck me that it potentially contained a sleight of hand, hiding in plain sight. My unease had to do with the dangers of conflation and of elision: of community-based research being accommodated at a *pre-existing* global research table – standardised, competitive, hierarchical. An academic journal, much like research excellence frameworks, funding criteria and promotion prerequisites, is always and already engaged in the world: choices (and avoidances) are not neutral, whether deliberate or not.

Jeffrey Grabill (2012, p. 213), discussing his own deepening appreciation of community-based research, argues that 'the concept and possibility of community itself must become a primary object of inquiry for any community-based study'. He frames this as an 'issue of stance' – both pragmatic and conceptual. He goes on: '[C]ommunities don't exist ready-formed and discoverable. We construct them as we work' (Grabill 2012, p. 213). In a similar way, this journal has come to understand the care, even vigilance, required to ensure that the 'global research table' is not imagined as an already-made destination, a place at which community-based research arrives. Instead, it must be co-constructed, constantly built anew by many hands, lest it not be sufficiently of our own making. Further, and at the risk of overextending the metaphor, I'd suggest that it is not one, but many research tables of different materials, shapes and sizes that we should be crafting. I won't go on! But this is not mere word play – it was hard-won effort that resulted in institutional recognition of the legitimacy and value of participatory and action-oriented methodologies 'in the field'. At the same time, it *is* word play – of a very consequential kind. Who gets to write what, why, how and for whose benefit is at the heart of journal work. Let me share a small story to illustrate my point.

Gateways' Volume 10 (2017) contained six articles by previous first and second-placed winners of the MacJannet Prize for Global Citizenship. The winning projects came from Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Malaysia, Pakistan and Australia. We launched the volume at the Talloires Network Leaders Conference in Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico, in June 2017, where I hosted a panel with the lead author of each of the articles. When I was preparing my notes for the presentation, it had seemed important to me to offer some sort of editorial overview, some insight born of intimate knowledge of all the individual papers. But I couldn't think what that might be and felt that I had failed somehow. It was only later, when listening to their separate presentations, that I realised where I had been going wrong. Actually, it was the act of *sitting alongside* them that brought clarity: there was no need (much less request) for some grand, connecting thread, and to look for one was to misunderstand the real value and challenge of our polyphonic collaboration. Savransky (2017, p. 19, italics in the original), himself reflecting on the work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, puts it perfectly when he writes that what is required is a 'different kind of imagination. [One that] seeks to take the thought of others – which is also to say, the reality of others – seriously … rather than attempting to think *about* difference, it seeks to think *with* the difference that thinking from the South itself makes'.

For higher education, and academic publishing, this would signify a profound shift indeed, ideologically, culturally, materially and methodologically. *Gateways* believes very strongly that community-based research is an essential part of such a shift. Further, that journals and other publications have a vitally important contributing role to play. *Gateways* also contends that community-based research, while still emergent and uneven, *is* recognisable, in the sense that the core tenets of collaboration, critical questioning and a research-for-change orientation are widely and well established. The single most common reason for submission decline or request for revisions at our journal is that the research presented is not community engaged. Often, a community-based methodological stance is barely demonstrated. But, following Savransky, I wonder if there is another, equally important way to think about recognition. Journals have an important role to play in building recognition of difference, to establishing an inclusive vocabulary, practices and processes that allow for sitting with and alongside difference in this shared institutional space.

In his discussion of 'the politics of evidence' for qualitative researchers, Denzin (2009, p. 153) argued that there 'is more than one version of disciplined, rigorous inquiry – counter-science, little science, unruly science, practical science – and such inquiry need not go by the name of science'. Janzen and Ochocka (2020, p. 5) have recently argued in this journal that community-based research 'is emerging as a common descriptor of research that seeks both to challenge and provide an alternative to externally led and expert-driven research'. Surely this community-based alternative includes counter, little, unruly and practical science.

For a journal, this raises many questions – the point of this Editorial. How could unruly science be communicated, with what words (or images, videos or sounds), by whom and for whom? What sort of peer review would be needed? Such exploratory and innovative efforts are already occurring, as can be seen in many of the articles published by *Gateways*. There is a real need, however, to empirically and critically understand these emergent efforts at communicating a different sort of science, or sciences. This is something to which journals are well placed to contribute. Looking forward, as editors, we are challenged to expand our frames of recognition along the lines discussed above – as a different kind of imagination, one that involves thinking *with* difference rather than *about* difference. We envisage further efforts to promote the various article sections as well as encourage contributions featuring innovative and participatory use of multimedia. The writers' workshops in the themed volumes have proven to be extremely well received: editors and guest editors work hard to ensure that, regardless of outcome, the process of writing is a constructive experience for all submitting authors. There is scope to build on these, and to share their learnings.

In this journal's experience, we have seen time and again that the greatest levels of participation by faculty, staff, students, community members and practitioners in article submission, development and

publication has occurred because of collaboration. That is unreservedly the path we wish to continue on. This includes going down paths less well trod, less familiar perhaps, together with authors, readers, referees and, indeed, other journals and editors. As an Editorial Committee, we remain committed to the vital work of recognising research tables, wherever and however they may be, and we are aware that it is often we who are drawing up a chair.

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