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EDITORIAL

Building a Model for Dispersed Openness

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Abstract

This Editorial explores the contribution an academic journal can make to critically engaged scholarship through critical self-reflection and innovation. Community-university engaged research and practice, no longer marginalised perhaps, remains nonetheless institutionally precarious and the literature dominated by voices from the Global North. For this journal, with its stated aim of increasing the diversity of contributors to the scholarly literature, there is both a responsibility and an opportunity to innovate. This Editorial discusses two recent examples: writers' workshops for manuscript development and the newly introduced 'proposals' section, where authors can gain early feedback on manuscript ideas.

Keywords

Open Access; Openness; Pre-Manuscript Proposals; Critically Engaged Scholarship; Community-University Engagement

Introduction

In their recent review of engaged scholarship, US-based scholars [Lynn Blanchard and Andrew Furco \(2021\)](#), p. 34) outline what they see as a gradual emergence of 'a common set of principles and practices for how engaged scholarship is defined and operationalised'. They argue that core characteristics include participatory practices; reciprocity; co-construction; democratic practices; shared authority; and shared resources ([Blanchard & Furco 2021](#), p. 35). Further, drawing on the work of [Cynthia Gordon de Cruz \(2018\)](#), among others, they note

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the increased emphasis on *critical* community engaged scholarship, with its explicit focus on justice-oriented structural change. They write, ‘a goal of critically-engaged scholarship is to have an impact not only on the societal issue, but also on the scholars’ perspectives and the prevailing systems that perpetuate the issues’ ([Blanchard & Furco 2021](#), p. 33).

As a focal point of scholarly activity and legitimacy, academic journals are widely perceived as being primarily concerned with maintaining rather than dismantling prevailing systems. There is no doubt that much of today’s global commercial publishing landscape is inimical to the inclusive, participatory and knowledge democracy goals of engaged research and practice. Within peer-reviewed journals, processes of submission, review, revision and dissemination can further entrench wider knowledge hierarchies. [Fear and Sandman \(2019](#), p. 108, italics in the original) draw attention to this point when they call for a ‘second-wave movement’. They explain: ‘in this second-wave movement, we won’t contend (as we did before) that *the academy is underengaged* because we will have recognised that the academy has always been engaged – sometimes overengaged and for private gain’. For any journal focused on community-university engagement, as well as books and conferences, there is both a responsibility and an opportunity to critically explore its own prevailing systems to help drive positive social and cognitive change. For me, this issue is what makes journal work relevant and energised, as well as subject to critique.

When I first began thinking about the potential contribution journals could make, beyond merely publishing engaged literature, an early conceptualisation that I found useful was that offered by [Strand et al. \(2003\)](#). While their discussion focused on community-based research, it also suggested to me a credible expression of the ways in which a journal could contribute as both publisher and example of critically engaged scholarship. They wrote that the ‘distinctive combination of collaborative inquiry, critical analysis, and social action’ make community-based research (CBR) ‘a potentially revolutionary strategy for achieving long-lasting and fundamental institutional change’. In relation to knowledge, [Strand et al. \(2003](#), p. 7) argued that CBR ‘challenges some basic assumptions about knowledge itself: what constitutes valid knowledge, how it is best produced (and by whom), and who should control it’. This became my rule of thumb for *Gateways*: collaboration, knowledge democracy and institutional action for epistemic change. These have been our touchstones since the journal’s founding in 2008, itself the result of our very first collaboration between Loyola University in the USA and the University of Technology Sydney in Australia. These founding principles continue to guide us today and have most clearly taken shape in our focus on diversifying, strengthening and championing North-South-East-West participation in academic publishing. We are deeply committed to this. It is a core stance, which has helped shape our practices, processes and publications across editorial, guest editorship, external peer review, authorship and readership over many years ([Malone 2022](#)).

This Editorial is a continuation of that ongoing effort. My key aim here is to renew, if not sharpen, our journal’s understanding and application of these key tenets in relation to our work as it has evolved. To do so, I focus first on a recent initiative – the writers’ workshops in the themed volumes – and then outline a new offering for our general volumes – the option to submit pre-manuscript proposals. For the last four years, the Editorial Committee, in partnership with guest editors, has facilitated online writers’ workshops as part of our annual themed volume, which is published every December. All authors whose proposals had been accepted were invited to take part in the workshops, offered as a way to support manuscript development. These voluntary writers’ workshops are held online, involve one to three sessions per volume, each session lasting approximately two hours. Attendance is not a guarantee of publication or even external peer review. The participants come from many countries and have varying levels of experience with academic writing. We have now offered these writers’ workshops over the last four themed volumes, and it has become apparent that their value is greater than manuscript development alone. Authors share relevant literature, learn about each other’s work and context, explore methodological issues, deepen their understanding of the volume’s theme and questions, and reflect more generally on scholarly writing in the context of community-engaged research and practice. In essence,

participants build a community of practice. Anecdotal feedback, such as that in the following quote, suggests that the workshops are useful and valued.

Thank you so much for the wonderful workshop! I learned a lot from the discussion, which I will share with the co-authors. I was also impressed by your facilitation. You created a safe space for us all, while reminding us [of] the deadline and other things to care about at the same time. This kind of facilitation [was] not easy because we were meeting for the first time with each other, and it was even virtual! (Author workshop participant, in email correspondence with the journal, 2/6/2023).

We see further evidence of their positive impact in the willingness of workshop participants to subsequently contribute as referees on a later volume. Comprehensive evaluation of the workshops will occur this year, from which we will gather detailed feedback from participating authors and guest editors on what works, what doesn't, what could be improved, how, why and for what purposes. This feedback will help further embed the workshops as a core feature of our themed volumes. There is also potential for expansion: workshops could be held after external peer review, for example, or at the initial proposal stage. Workshops could also be held for external peer reviewers.

I see in these workshops strong confirmation of a distinct methodological framework for *Gateways'* themed volumes that has emerged over the past few years. This represents a deepening of our commitment to collaboration, knowledge democracy and institutional change through bold and relevant experimentation. The themed volumes are emerging as our primary place to challenge ourselves (authors, editors and reviewers), and hopefully the field as a whole. This year's [themed volume](#), for example, due to be published in December 2024, will focus on multi-modal and multi-perspectival ways of communicating engaged research and practice. The seasons, rivers, insects, emotions, objects, technology and humans all play a part in the co-authored manuscripts: how to write such research and how to assess it? Whose voices need to be heard, and in which positions of authority? By building communities of practice through writers' workshops, we hope to establish a sustainable and sustaining model for communication and dissemination; one that is not predicated on shoehorning engagement into narrowly defined conventions at the point of its institutionalisation in an academic journal.

***Gateways'* general volumes**

The emerging importance of the writers' workshops in our themed volumes has also prompted consideration of our general volumes, such as this one here. The clarity of purpose taking shape in the themed volumes has revealed something of its absence in the general volumes. There is a need to renew the general volumes' sense of purpose, ensuring they are explicitly – not generally – responsive to and shaped by their own priorities. At their core, *Gateways'* general volumes exist to provide scholars and practitioners with a dedicated space to demonstrate the legitimacy, credibility and rigor of their engaged research and practice. These general volumes are intended to be a place for all within the broad engaged movement. By design, then, the general volumes employ processes and practices meant to be flexible and expansive. There is no set theme or focus. There are no set timetables. There is no initial vetting stage of proposals, as there is in the themed volumes. Instead, any author/s can submit a manuscript, indicating only the appropriate section: peer-review research, practice-based or snapshot. Manuscripts are accepted on a rolling basis and are published in similar fashion. The volume 'opens' in June, with how ever many articles are ready for publication, and more are added on a rolling basis until archiving in early December. The time from submission to publication can be as short or long as authors need.

The above measures were put in place with the hope of better enabling participation by diverse authors in scholarly communication and dissemination. Our widening lead-author-by-country profile suggests that the above approach is working well. Over the last four years *Gateways* received manuscript submissions from 35 different countries (see [Table 1](#)). This compares with submissions from 14 countries in *Gateways'* first four

years (2008–2012). These geographically diverse submissions offer the journal and the wider field a unique picture of global *dispersion*. They reveal the enormous variety of theoretical foundations, methodological approaches, place-based matters of concern and modes of participation currently being led by people, groups and myriad organisations all over the world. This is a precious resource.

Of course, the flipside of submission is publication. And here we can see how much more remains to be done if we are to fully support and grow this resource: over the last four years, published articles came from 15 countries. This is an increase from nine countries in our first four years, but a way off 35. There are many reasons for this gap, some of which are substantially outside of our control. We regularly receive submissions that have nothing to do with engagement and they are declined; but the pressure to publish in English language journals is enormously wasteful and benefits few. Those submissions are included in the table below. However, many others are well matched to our journal but need further work, ranging from

Table 1. Submitted manuscripts and published articles by lead-author-by-country, 2018–2022

Country	Submitted manuscripts	Published articles	Country	Submitted manuscripts	Published articles
USA	65	23	Colombia	2	2
Canada	46	18	Germany	2	1
Australia	25	5	Ghana	2	0
South Africa	13	3	Malaysia	2	0
Great Britain	11	4	Angola	1	1
Indonesia	8	1	Brazil	1	0
Nigeria	5	0	China	1	0
Kenya	5	2	Israel	1	0
Tanzania	5	0	South Korea	1	0
Uganda	4	1	Lesotho	1	0
Ireland	3	1	Libya	1	0
India	3	0	Pakistan	1	0
Italy	3	1	Poland	1	0
Philippines	2	1	Russia	1	0
Argentina	2	0	Saudia Arabia	1	0
Austria	2	0	Sweden	1	0
Bangladesh	2	0	Taiwan	1	0
Belgium	2	1			
Total: 227 submitted manuscripts from 35 countries					
Total: 65 published articles from 15 countries					
Decline rate: 71%					

Source: UTS ePress.

minor to substantial revisions. These submissions display widely varying levels of the capacity and capability of authors to share their work with external readers via an English language academic journal. It's this group that concerns our Editorial Committee the most. Working diligently and carefully with these authors on a one-to-one basis is valuable and important, but many manuscripts still don't make it to publication. This is especially true (though not exclusively) of submissions from the Global South. The table below makes this plain.

The critical, practical and ethical question for us, then, is how to improve what we do in order to better support this diverse group *where they're at*. We have long done the most obvious work of removing technical and financial barriers, among other efforts. Adopting an open access model from the outset (all articles are free to read and free for submitting authors) is an essential step for a journal to take but by itself insufficient. Even this remains all too rare: a recent report by the [European University Association \(2022, p. 8.\)](#) found that among new research published globally, 'roughly 85%' sits behind paywalls. More critically, as Florence Piron warns, open access may inadvertently serve as little more than a 'neocolonial tool' if the flow of knowledge remains predominantly one-way. She argues that 'by making the work produced at the center of the world system more accessible, open access maximizes its impact on the periphery and reinforces its use as a theoretical reference or as a normative model, to the detriment of local epistemologies' ([Piron 2018](#)).

There is indeed a need for a concerted 'second wave'. The [UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science \(2021\)](#) offers an excellent grounding for journals. It advocates for open science practices that foster *openness* as part of a broader, wider and deeper change effort. There is scope here for *Gateways* to move more intentionally towards what I am framing as a model of dispersed openness for our general volumes. I see two interconnected aims: one, to establish earlier and ongoing relationships with authors in order to build capacity; and two, to build this through a flexible, accessible, responsive and sustainable system that is author-led. To this end, *Gateways* has now introduced a voluntary proposal option for authors. This pilot is open to any author who wishes to obtain some feedback on a proposal prior to submitting a full manuscript. We imagine this will be of most use to those new to academic writing and/or those for whom English is not their first language. Proposal outlines are welcome at any stage of an engaged research project (as early as is useful for the author/s). Once submitted to the journal (under a new '[Proposals](#)' section), the proposal can be revised as many times as necessary over whatever time frame is needed; the writing can (and should) be simple and clear; the same editor will engage with the author on the proposal, as much as possible; and there is no obligation to submit any subsequent manuscript with the journal; nor is there any obligation on the journal's behalf to publish the manuscript.

When preparing a proposal for submission (via the journal's online system), we have developed the following prompts for authors to consider, keeping the total word count to around 500 words:

- What is the purpose of your proposed manuscript? That is, what do you wish to share with *Gateways*' readers? Try and explain your purpose in 3–5 sentences.
- Does your purpose align with *Gateways*' purpose: to share theory, research, pedagogy and practice related to all forms of community-university engagement?
- If yes, please tell us a little bit about the community-university collaboration to be featured.
- What is the key question or focus you wish to explore? Why is it significant, and for whom?
- How do you propose to explore this focus in your manuscript? In your answer, you may point to things such as key concepts or literature, methodological approach, use of data, engaged writing strategy (including multi-modal), etc.
- Is the manuscript to be co-authored? If not, why not?

Concluding thoughts

On January 1, only a couple of weeks after the publication of the above-mentioned article, a great earthquake devastated [town]. Being away from the area, I was not directly affected, while many of my co-authors were. I am submitting this proposal only three weeks after the earthquake. I haven't been able to find any clue yet, but one thing is clear. The types of academic writing that we have been using ... is the least sought type of many information sources by local practitioners striving to fight urgent and severe issues in their communities. (Submitting author, Themed volume Proposal, 23/01/2024).

The above quote is from the same author who congratulated *Gateways* on the successful facilitation of a writers' workshop, included earlier in this article. This quote is from a separate proposal submitted in response to a Call for Papers, which was not accepted by the Editorial team. One reason for that decision was a perceived sense of 'unreadiness'. The author acknowledged as much, noting that they hoped to be able to participate once again in a writers' workshop. While undoubtedly a modest step, this pilot for a system of one-on-one proposal development hopefully goes some way to assist authors in their diverse and evolving scholarly communication efforts in ways that are not wasteful or misleading. Most importantly, we hope this encourages more variety and more experimentation rather than adherence to dominant conventions for scholarly writing. [Walter Lepore and Barbara Jenni \(2024, p. 37\)](#) have similarly argued that '... the critical task of partnership coordinators and leaders is to build and maintain a sustainable system of shared meanings in the CURP [community university research partnership] as a whole, without losing sight of the wide variety of KCs [knowledge cultures] – with their own values, ideologies and cultural forms – that exist within the partnership'. We hope this proposal option contributes in the same vein.

Gateways journal, like others in the field, was established at a time when many discipline-based journals and institutions were less than convinced of the merits of community-based research and practice. Fifteen years later, engagement is increasingly recognised as vital scholarly activity, spanning research, teaching and outreach. Yet the strength of this institutional commitment remains uneven and highly contingent ([Marginson & Smolentseva 2014](#); [Watermeyer & Lewis 2018](#)). The scholarly literature on engagement is but one case in point. English language journal articles (as well as books and conferences) remain marked by the absence of substantive contributions by those with non-discipline-based expertise, by students and those from the Global South ([Koekkoek et al. 2021](#)). We are well past the time when this can be justified. Innovative, sustainable, open and democratic systems need to be explored and established if we are to see the social and cognitive changes so urgently needed. As [Bruno Latour \(2021, p. 128\)](#) so eloquently wrote in *After lockdown*, 'If we've tipped over into the new world, gone back inside living conditions whose remains we're obliged to mend, then the most important movement is to be able to scatter in all directions. If only we had the time'.

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