

Doctoral students' perceptions of how their sustained engagement in peer review impacted on their development as academic writers (0008)

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The ability to write critically is an important, yet for many students challenging, facet of doctoral study. In this action research project we engaged EdD students in a postgraduate community in which they were able to develop their understanding of criticality through their involvement in a social process of peer assessment and review. This paper reports on the doctoral students' perceptions of how their sustained engagement in peer review contributed to their development as critical writers over time.

### **The study**

Participants are all EdD students at the University of Leicester. The EdD is a part-time, professional doctorate designed for full-time teachers and school leaders. Whilst there is an annual summer school and an initial induction residential, students are to all intents and purposes working as distance learners, remote from the University. This can be a very isolating experience, and we sought therefore to find a meaningful way in which to foster students' engagement in the research community.

A second issue that had come to our notice was that some students found it difficult to accept and act upon critical feedback from supervisors on their module assignments. Affective barriers seemed to impede some students' ability to heed formative feedback. We wanted to effect a shift in students' 'mindset' (Dweck, 2006), fostering an openness of mind, and the resilience needed to give and receive critical feedback.

The project began with an intensive, residential, critical writing weekend. Ten students engaged in peer assessment activities designed to develop their understanding of critical writing and to induct them into peer review. Participants then formed the editorial board for an online, student-led journal.

Participants were interviewed before and after the initial weekend to ascertain shifts in their understanding of criticality and their confidence as writers. They were interviewed a third time, almost two years later, by which time the board had published five editions of the journal and the participants had engaged in a sustained way in writing, reviewing and receiving feedback from others. (Please see <https://journaleducationalresearchinformedpractice.wordpress.com> )

We draw here on data from the third phase of interviews to consider what participants perceive to have been the longer-term impact of their engagement in the project on their learning as critical writers.

## **Findings**

We identified three overarching themes from the transcripts of the phase three interviews:

- Enhanced learning and confidence
- Growing independence
- Becoming an academic

We discuss these themes in more detail below.

### ***Enhanced learning and confidence***

All participants were to some extent learning to accept critical feedback from peers, although some had found this more challenging than others. All participants agreed though that engagement in reviewing *others'* work had been very important in their own learning and development. They reported feeling more able and more confident now to tackle peer review and comment constructively on others' work. This was a significant shift from the start of the project when most felt hesitant, uncertain and unqualified to comment on others' work, seeing it as an enormous responsibility and potentially hurtful to others. Interestingly, all also commented in the phase three interviews on their increased awareness of how to improve their own writing as a result of reviewing the work of others. Importantly, all felt they now had a better understanding of criticality than at the start, although one person still felt she had some way to go with this, especially in looking critically at her own work.

### ***Growing independence***

All except one participant explained that they had grown less dependent on their doctoral supervisor as a result of being involved in the peer review project. They were more able to critique their own work and take ownership of it, and in a couple of cases participants said that they had moved towards using their supervisor as a sounding board or critical friend rather than looking to him for guidance and direction. This developing independence seemed to be linked by most participants to taking better control of their time and workload, to the benefit of their doctoral studies.

### ***Becoming an academic***

All participants considered that being a part of a research community through their involvement in the journal had been influential on their progress as critical writers and their sense of becoming an academic. All reported that they had made considerable progress in their understanding of the processes, purposes and culture of peer review, appreciating the complexity, importance and responsibility involved in evaluating others' work. At the start of the project participants had talked more about their *own need of support* from others. By the phase three interviews, the discussion had turned to the importance of meaningful engagement in the research community and the instructive nature of *providing* peer feedback on draft articles, book reviews and so forth. In four cases, the students had begun to write for publication, either for the student

journal or for other academic journals, and were developing an awareness of different types of academic writing and the need to write for different audiences.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The design of this project is premised on the notion of writing, and learning to write, as 'relational' (Murray, 2015: 1) and 'social practice' (Kamler and Thomson, 2006: 5). Our aims were to develop doctoral students' critical writing skills through engagement in peer review, and to foster a sense of belonging to a research community. The data suggest that for the most part, the aims were achieved and criticality, self-confidence and sense of becoming an academic were enhanced.

Students were inducted into the process of peer review via a set of structured peer assessment activities, and set the challenge of establishing and running a journal for a sustained period. This process seems to have been invaluable to students. Developing critical friendships (Storey, 2013; Smith *et al*, 2016; Storey, 2016) and availing of opportunities to give and receive feedback on publications in an open-access journal have been learning experiences that are arguably too important to leave to chance. We would recommend that these be built into the postgraduate research experience, especially for part-time doctoral students who can so often be marginalized.

## **References**

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