

Expanding Whose Voices Are Included in Academic Publishing About Student Services

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“Genre borders are only as real as our imaginations are small” (Vuong, 2019, p. 245). When I read this sentence in the acknowledgements of Ocean Vuong’s prize-winning first novel, I thought about Vuong’s beautiful refusal of genre conventions in what *Kirkus Reviews* (2019) called “an uncategorizable hybrid” of “memoir, bildungsroman, and book-length poem” (para. 2). I also considered what lessons such a refusal might hold for us in the realm of academic writing. Questioning conventions is integral to challenging traditional exclusionary practices. In the academic realm, that includes expanding the forms of writing—and the kinds of experience and knowledge represented in that writing—that are valued, affirmed, and published. Such expansion is about both removing barriers to publication and reconceptualizing who counts as a knower and author. The latter, a form of epistemic justice (Fricker, 2003), should be a primary goal in academic publishing about student services, with its explicit focus on student engagement, participation, wellbeing, and success.

Mainstream academic publishing has prided itself on being “selective” based on processes of peer review (Enslin & Hedge, 2018). As Cook-Sather and Healey (2024) noted, the exclusionary selection criteria that drive peer review processes—often cloaked in claims of “standards,” “quality,” and “objectivity”—have been characterized as lacking transparency and reviewer accountability, reinforcing gatekeeping, and perpetuating conservatism (Arumugam et al., 2020; Garrido-Gallego, 2018; Overall, 2015). The question of whose voice, particularly student voice, is invited and included in educational spaces has been explored by numerous scholars and practitioners in both Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand in relation to primary and secondary schooling and reform (Berryman & Eley, 2024; Bourke & Loveridge, 2018). Emerging practices of citation justice (Coalter, 2023)—the deliberate citing of research by authors from underrepresented groups with the goal of redressing their exclusion from scholarly conversations—aim to counter some of these discriminatory practices across all levels of education and forms of publication. But if genres themselves, and who is welcomed through and by them, are not changed, then we continue to labor within and reinforce dominant cultural practices rather than refuse and push beyond them.

A new section of this journal blurs the genre boundaries of case studies, reflective essays, and stories, which have different goals and are perceived in different ways among the genres of academic publishing (Healey et al., 2020b). “Voices From the Field” expands what and whose experience and knowledge are included in academic publishing about student services and was inspired by a section of the same name that I co-conceptualized several years ago for *International Journal for Students as Partners* (IJSaP).¹ This expansion of genres in which JANZSSA publishes promises to challenge traditional exclusionary practices in academic publishing about student services through welcoming a wider range of perspectives on student engagement, participation, wellbeing, and success.

¹ <https://mulpress.mcmaster.ca/ijsap>

Welcoming new forms of writing into academic publishing

To contextualize the creation of this new section of JANZSSA (and to model some genre blurring), I reflect on my own journey toward challenging exclusionary practices in academic publishing. When I first became a professor, I did not question those practices. As a white, well-resourced college faculty member, I wrote uninhibited in the expected genres, aided by having completed a major in English as an undergraduate and having informally written poetry in my teens. However, the more I leaned into both practices of and leadership in the related fields of student voice, pedagogical partnership, and co-creation, the more aware I became of how exclusive academic publishing practices have been. In response, one of my earliest published articles focused on “authorizing” student perspectives in teacher education (Cook-Sather, 2002), and my work since then has evolved from a commitment to “authorizing” to a commitment to creating structures and spaces within which students can author(ize) themselves.

In 2010, after having shifted my focus from secondary teacher preparation to tertiary faculty development, I launched a journal that features the reflective writing of college faculty and students working together to explore and enact effective classroom practice—to maximize student engagement, participation, wellbeing, and success. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* (TLTHE)² is not peer reviewed, and its goal is to provide a forum for sharing the messy work of engaging in student–faculty partnership focused on higher education pedagogical practices. TLTHE encourages reflections on thoughts, actions, and experiences as those relate to what and how one is learning. Anyone working in higher education—faculty in all kinds of institutional positions, staff members in a variety of roles, and students engaged in undergraduate and graduate studies—are welcome to publish their work. TLTHE embraces all these people as knowers and recognizes their perspectives as valuable.

Having published nearly 50 issues of TLTHE as well as analyzed how reflective writing impacts authors (Cook-Sather et al., 2019; Cook-Sather & Cott, in press), I am convinced that this genre supports writers—and readers—in pushing beyond cultural norms in academic publication. As authors of reflective essays argue, there is an impact on what gets included in both the work that informs and the writing produced in this genre. One faculty author wrote, “Being an informal and inductive process, shared reflection allowed for a wide range of experiences and ideas to enter the funnel of refinement” (as cited in Cook-Sather et al., 2019, p. 19). Another faculty member asserted:

The reflective writing genre gives permission to think from your lived experience first and foremost, which is not where I start with academic writing in [my discipline/field]. Instead of focusing on product and outcome with polished (censored) narrative—again, typical of my experience of academic writing—reflecting on practice creates space for making sense of your progress ... and grappling with what you are learning as you go. (as cited in Cook-Sather et al., 2019, p. 20)

There is also an impact on who feels able to publish, according to a third faculty member: “The informal nature of the reflective genre of writing lowers the bar for participation in sharing ideas, with the result of increasing the number of participants whose experiences are shared” (as cited in

² <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/>

Cook-Sather et al., 2019, p. 20). And finally, reflective writing affirms a greater diversity of people and the legitimacy of their voices, as a student author noted:

Adding [reflective] practice to knowledge creation and the academy would give marginalized students more of a voice in the classroom and in academia. It helps us realize that our voices matter, our stories matter, we matter. In a space that often doesn't reflect us, reflective practice reminds us that we fit into this landscape. (as cited in Cook-Sather et al., 2019, p. 23)

These kinds of individual experiences can inspire a yearning for a different culture. Kaur (2024) explained that, after having been trained to write in a distanced and ostensibly objective way, having the opportunity to write in a reflective mode “ignited within me a profound longing for a more compassionate and humane academic writing culture” (p. 235). Such a culture not only benefits faculty and staff as people but also positions them to focus in more relational and inclusive ways on student engagement, participation, wellbeing, and success.

Seven years after founding TLTHE, when I joined the inaugural editorial board of IJSaP, I argued that we should include the reflective essay genre in that journal. Part of my reasoning was that doing so would open the journal to a greater diversity of authors and affirm a wider range of knowledges, a particularly important goal of a journal focused on students as partners. My collaboration with IJSaP editors from other countries led to a book project about academic writing (Healey et al., 2020b). One of our goals was to complicate conceptions of genre and amplify arguments for epistemic justice—some of which had emerged from another collaboration with an IJSaP colleague and two students focused on epistemic (and affective and ontological) justice (de Bie et al., 2021). In a piece called “Expanding the Conventional Writing Genres: A Matter of Equity and Inclusion,” my colleagues and I argued that “the forms and borders of writing are, in many arenas, conventional and unquestioned,” and we acknowledged that “it requires courage and encouragement to push beyond them” (Healey et al., 2020a, p. 9). We asserted that, rather than seeing the blurring of genre boundaries in academic writing as problematic, we might follow Vuong’s (2019) lead and embrace such blurring as a reflection of “the ways in which imagination resists reductive forms of containment and requires instead an ongoing process of rethinking and revising our ways of engaging, analysing, and sharing understandings” (Healey et al., 2020a, p. 9).

In recent years, other journals have also added the reflective writing genre as an option through which authors are invited to publish. These have included *To Improve the Academy*, the flagship publication of the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network in Higher Education, and *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, the official publication of the International Society of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL). These additions reflect recognition of both the necessity of removing barriers and expanding access to publishing opportunities, and the value of including the perspectives of a wide range of knowers.

The final chapter of my story relevant to this discussion is the creation of “Voices From the Field” as a new section of IJSaP. Several years into my co-editing of IJSaP, we had a discussion at an editorial board meeting of how to include an even wider range of voices in what we published about students-as-partners work. I proposed that we create a new journal section that would explicitly invite short contributions from a range of people and intentionally remove the time-consuming process of peer review. My student co-editor at that time, Sarah Slates, and I took the lead in piloting this new section and the blend of case study, reflective writing, and story that it would feature. As we explained in framing the first “Voices From the Field” section IJSaP published, our goal was to create a “space to share a diversity of emerging ideas, opinions, and perspectives on

important questions about [pedagogical] partnership work” (Cook-Sather et al., 2021, p. 146). More specifically, we aimed “to support the voices of those who might not normally be represented within traditional forms of academic publishing and/or who do not have time for, or interest in, working through the peer-review process but who have something to say” (Cook-Sather et al., 2021, p. 146).

JANZSSA expands genres and affirms a diversity of voices

A conversation with Professor Caroline Rueckert, Dean of Student Experience and Employability at Griffith University and Editor-in-Chief of JANZSSA, led to the creation of a new “Voices From the Field” section for JANZSSA. In “Not Just the Usual Voices: Launching Voices From the Field” (Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association [JANZSSA], 2025), the editors affirmed their belief “that everyone working to support student success deserves to be heard” (para. 2). They acknowledged that frontline student services staff, academic partners, and external collaborators “contribute daily to enhancing student engagement, wellbeing, and belonging across tertiary education” (JANZSSA, 2025, para. 2). However, they noted, “too often, the insights of those in the field go unheard—lost to time constraints, the complexities of academic publishing, or a lack of confidence in navigating the traditional peer review process” (JANZSSA, 2025, para. 2). In creating this new section of JANZSSA, the editors demonstrated precisely the courage and conviction my co-authors and I discussed in “Expanding the Conventional Writing Genres: A Matter of Equity and Inclusion” (Healey et al., 2020a).

Refusing exclusions and striving to dismantle harmful cultural practices, scholars who argue for and model the blurring of genre boundaries and insist on the inclusion of a diversity of voices in conversations about teaching and learning are striving for epistemic justice (Fricker, 2003). An expansion of writing genres in academic publishing about higher education contexts can reflect and affirm a greater diversity of knowledges and voices among those writing about learning and teaching in colleges and universities. This expansion contributes to a shift away from a deficit view of diverse learning experiences to a view that recognizes and values “the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups” (Cook-Sather et al., 2020, para. 5).

As the journal in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand focused on student engagement, participation, wellbeing, and success in tertiary education in these countries, JANZSSA is imagining and inviting what lies beyond genre borders. By introducing a new section of the journal that, like “Voices From the Field” in IJSaP, affords opportunities to those who might not otherwise be part of the conversation, it challenges conventions of academic publishing. This new section offers insights into experiences and perspectives from which the exploration of student engagement, participation, wellbeing, and success will benefit, and it affirms those who contribute to this section as knowers worthy of recognition.

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