Insider Experiences of The Qualitative Report's Reviewing Process

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Abstract

We (Pamela, Tom, and Jenn) wanted to give you our insiders' experiences of the manuscript submission and reviewing process at The Qualitative Report (TQR). Respectively, we are a researcher-author, an instructor-reviewer, and a student-reviewer who were involved in the reviewing process that resulted in the publication of Pamela's TQR article: On Doctoral Student Development: Exploring Faculty Mentoring in the Shaping of African American Doctoral Student Success (Felder, in press). In this brief article, we will adopt a somewhat conversational approach to relating our individual and collective experiences. How we came to work together, what that work entailed, and our experiences of that collaborative work will be our focus. In short, we offer our insiders' sense of (and reflections on) what happens to a manuscript from the time of its submission to the time of its publication at TQR.

Keywords

The Qualitative Report, Collaborative Review Process, Critical Appraisal Skills Programmer

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Insider Experiences of *The Qualitative Report*'s Reviewing Process

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We (Pamela, Tom, and Jenn) wanted to give you our insiders' experiences of the manuscript submission and reviewing process at The Qualitative Report (TQR). Respectively, we are a researcher-author, an instructor-reviewer, and a student-reviewer who were involved in the reviewing process that resulted in the publication of Pamela's TQR article: On Doctoral Student Development: Exploring Faculty Mentoring in the Shaping of African American Doctoral Student Success (Felder, in press). In this brief article, we will adopt a somewhat conversational approach to relating our individual and collective experiences. How we came to work together, what that work entailed, and our experiences of that collaborative work will be our focus. In short, we offer our insiders' sense of (and reflections on) what happens to a manuscript from the time of its submission to the time of its publication at TQR. Key Words: The Qualitative Report, Collaborative Review Process, and Critical Appraisal Skills Programme

(Tom) In preparing to teach a graduate, qualitative research course I recalled a conversation with Jerry Gale, a University of Georgia colleague. Jerry spoke of how – as a class – they collectively reviewed a manuscript for *The Qualitative Report* (*TQR*). This seemed a great way to engage students in learning to critically read others' research in relationally accountable ways. So, I contacted my colleague Sally St. George, an editor with *TQR* (for whom I had done prior reviews), with a proposal that I would oversee a class assignment like this, but then see the reviewing process through to a published article. It was Sally who connected me with Pamela, who had just submitted a manuscript to *TQR*, just as Jenn was beginning her qualitative research class with me.

(Pamela) My perspectives about the *TQR* process are two-fold. As a researcher in the field of graduate student development I'm interested in disseminating my work in venues where it can inform a multidisciplinary scholarly community about the experiences of graduate students. I'm also interested in finding opportunities where my work can serve to facilitate the development of graduate students. Publishing in *TQR* presented an opportunity where I could do both. One of *TQR*'s editors, Sally St. George, suggested that I work with an editorial board member, Tom Strong, who would share the review process of my article as a teaching opportunity for students in his qualitative research course.

After considering numerous venues for submitting my article I decided to work with *TQR* based on several factors. First, my research embraces a qualitative

methodology used to explore the belief systems and student experiences of their doctoral programs. Given the richness of information in the student voices represented in the paper *TQR* clearly supported the value of my qualitative work. Second, as a professor who practices reflective pedagogy, the collaborative review process and the journal's objective: to not be "rejection rate" oriented – but to instead use the review process as a scholarly developmental opportunity, appealed to me. Third, the peer-review process is designed to strengthen a scholar's work and I found it refreshing that *TQR* formally acknowledges its role in assisting authors to improve their texts in its editorial statement. Additionally, research on doctoral student development is slowly emerging so little is known about the actual experiences of students. Thus, the journal's multidisciplinary approach to qualitative studies lends my research to a wide audience of scholars who may be interested in learning more about the doctoral student experience. Finally, *TQR*'s on-line article accessibility increases the potential for disseminating the article beyond typical journal search engines.

The review process took approximately six weeks to complete from submission to an "in press" article status. One of the most valuable aspects of this experience was learning that in addition to graduate student reviewers being exposed to my work about them, the lens through which they analyzed my work served as a platform to engage them in a rigorous review of research. While my work focused on the experiences of a specific student population, the faculty and student reviewers were enlightened by my work and mentioned that my research was relevant to their faculty and student experiences. Using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, students were able to "make sense" of my qualitative work (Public Health Resource Unit, 2006) by asking a series of ten screening questions that explored the appropriateness of my research design, data collection methods, ethics, and clarity of research findings. Initial review comments were helpful and comprehensive including editorial feedback on the methodological development of my study and style.

In reflecting on this process I'm reminded about the potential for learning that took place not just for the students involved but for me and the faculty reviewer as well. In their work about the construction of educational researchers Neumann and Pallas (2006) found that while the learning process begins during graduate school for educational researchers constant honing of that craft continues well into one's scholarly career. They state:

> Learning research and constructing the self as an educational researcher are career long tasks that typically are launched during doctoral study. Even more important than these activities, however, is learning how to learn as the vividness of graduate school fades with time and new challenges. Learning both about how to enact educational research and how to keep learning research throughout one's career will shape the quality of that career and thus the quality of one's contribution to educational research. (Neumann & Pallas, 2006, p. 429)

Neumann and Pallas' work underscores *TQR*'s editorial mission of the review process being enacted as a learning process. In the case of this review learning occurred in a multi-faceted fashion; facilitating learning on numerous levels expanding beyond

traditional boundaries of the peer-review process affecting student learning, facilitation of the educational researcher disciplinary identity on both the student and faculty level.

(Jenn) Editing Pamela's article as a project in my qualitative research class highlighted how varied my classmates' experiences and emphases were in reading that article. It was difficult at times to write up one collaborative review, in that everyone had different writing styles and ways of wanting to present our feedback so a negotiation followed as to which comments to include in our class feedback to Pamela - and why. While difficult at times, it also was a great learning opportunity, pushing each of us to be accountable for the meaningfulness and usefulness of our comments in ways we hoped would be helpful to Pamela and her final article. This prompted us to read the article more deeply while developing a better understanding of the reader's perspective and how important it is to write to their perspective.

(Tom) Jenn is raising a point I am thankful to read. One of the more challenging aspects of academic writing (thesis and otherwise) comes with acquiring and writing to a sense of how one will be read and responded to by others. It reminded me of Wertsch (1991), for whom social and literary competence reflects one's ability to anticipate and communicate from an acquired sense of others' responses – writing through the eyes of one's intended readers, so to speak.

(Jenn) Reviewing Pamela's article added to my understanding of what to include in my thesis, by getting me to reflect on how to present my research, and why… in retrospect I can see that I wrote from my own perspective… (failing) to adequately consider what the reader would want to know, writing instead, what I wanted to communicate. Providing feedback on the article helped me to identify areas in my own writing that need to be improved, and solidified the importance of writing backwards from the reader's perspective. It allowed me to reflect upon, and re-consider, the types of information that I as a reader would like to see included, as well as the ways in which this information is presented and organized.

(Tom) I didn't of course metaphorically throw "my" students (mostly new to qualitative research) into the deep end of the qualitative research, critical reading pool. We turned to evaluative criteria that Pamela mentioned earlier and that Jenn mentions below.

(Jenn) Utilizing the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP; Public Health Resource Unit, 2006), to review the article helped familiarize me with criteria useful for evaluating qualitative research articles while also benefiting me as I prepare to write my Master's thesis. It assisted me in planning, organizing, and writing the proposal for my thesis research while enhancing my understanding of how to write successful academic papers.

(Tom) I could have taught students evaluative criteria like those Jenn mentions, most likely as an abstract pedagogical exercise - had there not been an opportunity to use those criteria as we did in working together with Pamela. I recalled a thought-provoking chapter on this topic from John Shotter ("Textual Violence in Academe," Shotter, 1997) after reading a harsh rejection of one my own manuscripts a few years ago. A recurring theme in Shotter's writing is relational accountability and responsibility, an ethic I hoped my class would be helped in acquiring through working together with Pamela, and each other. When I got word from Sally at *TQR* that Pamela had granted us permission to work with her, I consulted Pamela's website at Columbia and showed my class her picture. I

wanted Jenn and her classmates to see Pamela, and we returned the favour by posing for Pamela as a class when we sent in our first collective review of her work, as informed by the CASP criteria (see Figure 1). I also thought this would tighten that circle of relationally accountable practice in how we would collectively respond to Pamela's article.

(Jenn) Knowing that Pamela was going to be reading my comments and suggestions made the process more real and increased the level of accountability. I felt trepidation while struggling with the idea of myself as a new Masters student providing feedback to an academic, like Pamela. I wanted to ensure that my comments were helpful, and meaningful, and that the way I presented them was considerate, tentative, and respectful. This process enabled me to consider the type of feedback I would like as a writer and the way I would like it to be presented. I felt that it was important to touch on Pamela's many strengths, so as to provide both positive and constructive feedback. I really enjoyed being able to read Pamela's response and to be a part of the whole process of publishing an article from the first round of editing. I think that this experience is invaluable both to students preparing to write a thesis and begin publishing, but also to individuals who may be interested in editing.

(Tom) On top of what Jenn says above, I also had a strong relation to what Pamela was saying in her article. Part of my role as an academic is as Graduate Coordinator for Masters and Doctoral students, and Pamela was writing about a topic I could see useful to both students and to the instructors working with them. In my own role as a supervisor (confession: I supervise Jenn's Master's thesis research) and as someone who reviews many papers that are eventually published, I struggle with how active my editing and critiquing role – what I get stubborn or pushy about with respect to others' writing – should be (check out Johnston & Strong, 2008). I want to see the best thesis or journal article go forward and have my own thoughts as to what might enable that to happen. The class writing experience resulted in one collaboratively edited letter back to Pamela, and some minor follow-up communications between Pamela and I on final details that led to the draft that now reads as her published article (Felder, in press). I turn the last words over to Pamela on the overall experience, as it is her work now featured in *TQR*.

(Pamela) As a professor and researcher in the field of graduate education I strive to facilitate and support the disciplinary identity development of my students. Whether I teach master's or doctoral students one of my strategies is to expose them to research and experiences about an essential function of the academy; the peer-review process. Like Tom I'm encouraged by Jenn's perspectives about her participation in the review of my paper and this subsequent reflection about our collaboration. Herein, our reflections illustrate that collective analysis about our experience of reexamining my paper is another valuable layer of the peer-review process. While this review of the peer-review process is not new, certainly it is an aspect of graduate education that should be encouraged more between research-authors, faculty and student reviewers. Our work is an innovation that underscores what Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, and Hutchings (2008) describe as "creating and sustaining intellectual communities." In fact, in their work a faculty member defines intellectual community in the following way:

Intellectual community is the most important facet of any doctoral community. Students need a supportive community among themselves and collegial relations with faculty. The opportunity to present one's work to such a community, to respond to work in progress by a faculty member, and to interact informally all function to raise students' sense of their own potential and help them learn to function as junior colleagues. (Walker et al., 2008, p. 120)

In many ways our collaborative work on this project is a manifestation of this description.

Figure 1
Class Photo

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Author Note

Dr. Pamela Felder joined the faculty of the Higher and Postsecondary Education Program as a Lecturer in September 2006. Prior to coming to Teachers College, Columbia University she was a Lecturer in the Policy, Management and Evaluation Division at the University of Pennsylvania where she developed and taught a course on college student retention and persistence. Dr. Felder's primary research interest is graduate student development with an emphasis on the doctoral experience. She is interested in the socialization experiences of graduate students and how they impact academic success, the development of disciplinary identities, and the management of life balance. Dr. Felder has shared her research in numerous educational venues and highlights include participation in the 2009 American Educational Research Association's Annual Meeting in San Diego California, a keynote presentation for the 2007 LEDA (Leaders for a Diverse America) Transition to College Symposium at Princeton University, and participation as an invited panelist to discuss faculty diversity held at the University of Pennsylvania in March 2007. Moreover, she developed and facilitated an institutional wide annual student diversity conference for three consecutive years at Teachers College geared towards encouraging her students to embrace cultural competence in higher education (http://www.tc.columbia.edu/news/article.htm?id=6911). Currently, Dr. Felder is working on several research projects including a paper on enacting diversity in the classroom, exploring racial battle fatigue among graduate students and faculty in elite educational environments and a research project that explores work/life balance issues for female doctoral students in education. She is a native and current resident of Philadelphia, PA and has a seven-year old daughter. She can be contacted at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, NY 10027 USA; Phone: 212-678-3811; Email: pamela.felder@gmail.com

Dr. Tom Strong is Associate Professor in Division of Applied Psychology of the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary. His research is concentrated in three areas: discursive analyses of psychotherapy and health conversations, theory development and application related to social constructionist (or discursive) approaches to counselling, and ethical issues in counselling. He wishes special thanks to Rom Harré and Bruno Latour for inspiring him to read these kinds of books. All correspondence should be addressed to Dr. Tom Strong, Division of Applied Psychology, University of Calgary, 2500 University Drive NW, Calgary, Alberta Canada T2N 1N4 or strongt@ucalgary.ca

Jenn Ronald is currently in her second year of the M.Sc. Counselling Psychology program at the University of Calgary. Her research interests are centered on the use of collaborative inquiry to better understand the strategies and strengths individuals employ in order to cope with difficult or traumatic life events, as well as methods through which counselors can facilitate healing by empowering clients to identify, acknowledge, and further develop their strengths and resourcefulness. Related to this is her master's thesis, for which she is developing and evaluating a strengths based and collaborative group treatment approach for female adolescent survivors of sexual abuse. She can be contacted at jwinters@ucalgary.ca.

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