Chapter 8: Building transnational, cross-cultural skills through an online, open reviewed journal

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Abstract

This chapter presents a case for ongoing discussion of ways in which digitally smart communication can help to build research skills in a globally linked world. It is based on a small cohort of submitters to an online journal of education which uses an open reviewing process and multiple iterations to encourage the development of papers of publishable quality in the journal. As the journal attracts papers that use Living Educational Theory, this is the theoretical underpinning for the methodology of the chapter. I, as author, am a reviewer for the journal and on its Development Board so I do not claim to be a disinterested party. Rather, I seek to show from a limited sample of successful submitters how research skills and an investigative community can be developed despite differences in geographical location and culture, and how this work is compatible with my Living Theory orientation. The chapter aims to provoke further investigation of this issue.

The theory of connectivism is referred to in investigating whether such differences affected the usefulness of the reviews to the authors. Feedback from those who agreed to participate indicates that the transnational, cross-cultural differences had no negative impact on authors' ability to shape their papers for publication. They indicated that the process had been most worthwhile and that open digital reviewing had been a valuable process in which to be engaged. The paper concludes with some thoughts on the benefits of open reviewing versus the more traditional closed reviewing in the building of researchers' skills and confidence, and seeks to promote ongoing investigation of this process.

Keywords: open reviewing, Living Theory, connectivism, cross-cultural, transnational, research skills development

Introduction

Digital developments worldwide are affecting diverse areas of practice, not least in education. Many people work in areas where digital communication is the norm. Some of us

struggle to adjust our practice and to make use of emerging technologies. Some of us are also pressured to produce research that is based on our practice. For all of those reasons, I accepted the challenge to contribute to *Digital Smarts*. I am an experienced peer reviewer for a number of publications and on the editorial board of three journals also. The online journal which is the subject of the current chapter focuses mainly on the higher education context. It uses a transparent, open reviewing process to assist authors to achieve the journal's publication standards. All this happens electronically, so the process was an ideal subject for a digital smarts chapter.

What does digital smarts mean in this context?

I see 'digital smarts' as the use of digital technology in a critical, self-reflective way to improve, enhance and disseminate understanding in a field of practice—in this case, a particular higher education focus: the development of transnational, cross-cultural[15] research skills. I was alerted to a possible dearth of research in cross-cultural aspects of transnational work through attending a workshop that included a colleague, Kerry Earl (contributor to this book), who shared a paper covering this matter (Zawicki-Richter, 2011).

While I have been an 'early adopter' (Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts, & Francis, 2006)[16] of some digital technologies, I do not always find new applications easy to grasp, and sometimes struggle with aspects of technology. However, I have always been a compulsive collaborator and, I suppose, an adaptive help-seeker (Steed & Poskitt, 2010). One of my aims is to promote the development of others as well as myself. So my work as a peer reviewer for the *Educational Journal of Living Theories* (EJOLTS—see www.ejolts.net) came to mind. This journal uses an open online reviewing process (described later), as is commensurate with the theoretical approach encouraged.

A short description of Living Theories is appropriate here. The term 'Living Theory' was initially coined by Jack Whitehead to counteract the belief that the disciplines-based approach to education, prevalent in the late 1960s and early 1970s, could explain how individuals influenced their own and each other's learning. (See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VoCwS89m1jo for an account of Whitehead explaining this development). Whitehead quoted Allender and Allender (2008), who stated that "the belief that educational research trumps practice, historically and still, is one of the major obstacles" (Whitehead, 2008, p. 105) to teachers having their expertise recognised. Whitehead (2008) defines living theory as

> an explanation produced by an individual for their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formation in which they live and work. (p. 104)

It is these kinds of explanations about learning and practice that are encouraged in EJOLTS contributions, which are read by an international audience. The journal presents, critiques and further

[15] I am using these terms to describe work that transcends both national and cultural boundaries, that encourages connection across countries and between people from different groups, be they ethnic, religious, socio-economic or 'other' to oneself.

[16] The term 'early adopter' was initially used in marketing by Rogers, but has been extensively applied to the information technology area by a range of authors. Sharpe et al. (2006) look at several of these papers.

develops robust research from those investigating their educational philosophies and practice through using an iterative, totally transparent review process. Far from conforming to positivist notions of 'objectivity', it challenges authors to clearly state their values and beliefs, and to show how they are working to ensure harmony between these through what they practise. The 'I' is very much part of the writing process. This theoretical approach underpins this chapter's methodology, as it resonates with my own desire both to promote equitable treatment for all cultures and peoples, and to subject my own practice to scrutiny and improvement. To what extent, I wondered, might comments from journal reviewers, including me, help people from different countries, cultures and fields of practice to develop research skills as they undergo the open reviewing process that EJOLTS uses? How might this process be an opportunity for growth? To what extent might feedback from very different reviewers affect that growth? These questions framed my investigation for this chapter.

Theoretical underpinnings and literature review

Living Theory is the yardstick by which my writing should be measured. In other words, to what extent am I demonstrating synchronicity between my claimed values (i.e., wanting to promote transnational and cross-cultural equity) and the work I undertake in my life, evidenced by this small example from my reviewing practice? I recognise the perils of generalising from small samples, so this chapter is intended to provoke further discussion rather than to claim 'success' from engagement with a tiny, although culturally and nationally diverse, group. I hope it challenges practices that I perceive as restrictive rather than expansive (closed, rather than open, reviewing). While not the main thrust of the chapter, I claim that the openness of the EJOLTS reviewing process is supportive of the development of transnational and cross-cultural research skills.

One of the joys of working collaboratively, including developing a book such as this, is that all those involved can be challenged to investigate and adapt/adopt emerging theories and methodologies. Hence, I was challenged by Dianne Forbes, one of the co-editors, to look at connectivism as an emerging educational theory in an attempt to revise learning theories in a digital age. Digital technologies make this not only possible but rapid and responsive. I investigated connectivism initially via a regularly cited author in the field, George Siemens. His "Connectivism: A Learning Theory for the Digital Age" article appeared on elearnspace.org in December 2004, from whence I accessed it on 12 March 2013. Siemens (2004) describes connectivism as

> the integration of principles explored by chaos, network, and complexity and self-organization theories. Learning is a process that occurs within nebulous environments of shifting core elements—not entirely under the control of the individual. Learning (defined as actionable knowledge) can reside outside of ourselves (within an organization or a database), is focused on connecting specialized information sets, and the connections that enable us to learn more are more important than our current state of knowing. (Connectivism section, para. 1)

Interested readers can access a video of Siemens speaking at The University of Waikato on this matter at http://coursecast.its.waikato.ac.nz/Panopto/Pages/Viewer/Default.aspx?id=054becac-8e61-4da5-88df-ba3696cfa429 (accessed June 10, 2014).

A tenet of connectivism is that learning can occur outside of individuals (the space between?); it can develop in organisations and through virtual communities such as that of EJOLTS. It therefore lends itself well for use as a tool to investigate communication that transcends national and cultural boundaries. As Kop and Hill (2008) stated in their investigation of connectivism and online learning,

> Online networks might be open and may facilitate connections, but local culture and values cannot be incorporated all that easily as the online networks are global, with diverse participants, each bringing his or her own ideas and background to the fore. (Teaching in a Connected Environment section, para. 3)

Their work indicated how online networks, following the principles of connectivism, are able to transcend local culture and values, building diverse knowledge through the collaboration and influence of individuals' ideas.

One of the principles of connectivism is that connections must be nurtured and maintained to facilitate continual learning; that decision-making is itself a learning process; that "choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality" (Siemens, 2004, Connectivism section, para. 3) So within EJOLTS, community is fostered through open processes in which reviewers and editors seek not just to maintain standards but to encourage growth and extend authors' knowledge and awareness of their own knowledge and skills. The national and cultural lenses of both authors and reviewers affect their approach, but the multiple iterations in EJOLTS, where each knows the other's identity, allow for queries, challenges and responses in a way that is far less likely in a closed reviewing process, where issues of nationality and cultural and educational biases are hidden. Authors' comments in reply, and indeed via their feedback sought for this paper, facilitate the journal's growth as well as the editors' and reviewers' knowledge. This exemplifies the idea of a 'shifting reality'.

EJOLTS is therefore developing a repository of (a) stories of research processes, including successes and failures; (b) a shared belief in the Living Theories process of investigation (see below); and (c) leveraging Internet affordances to provide international feedback to the submitter of each paper. Because this feedback is public, it is possible for research skills to develop and extend way beyond the original contributor, as will become evident from the respondents contributing to this chapter. Simultaneously, the Living Theories approach is reworked, extended and applied in transnational, cross-cultural contexts that test applicability and possibly shift knowledge. It is, perhaps, indicative of the strength of EJOLTS' virtual community that none of my respondents chose to remain anonymous, despite me offering them that option as part of the ethics protocols of the Faculty of Education, The University of Waikato. These participants consented to contribute their perspectives both for this chapter and in the interests of further strengthening EJOLTS' work.

In his seminal work on the development of Communities of Practice (COPs), Wenger (1998) described the need for people in such communities to work towards alignment of purposes, needs, methods and criteria in order to invest energy, find common ground, ethically wield power and authority, convince, inspire and unite community members, define visions and aspirations, propose stories of identity, devise methods that are usable across boundaries, and create boundary practices that reconcile diverging perspectives. I argue that EJOLTS has worked in a 'digitally smart' way to build such a community of practice. Even though contributors to the journal (editors, peer reviewers

and submitting authors) practise in diverse countries and cultures, they seek common ground. Involvement in the Educational Journal of Living Theories helps us to story our identity. This enables the crossing of cultural, geographic and educational boundaries without misusing power and authority. It is not uncommon for those submitting to more traditional journals to find their work summarily dismissed by 'blind reviewers' who may not understand the contexts from which the authors come, nor the importance of their work to their own communities. EJOLTS operates an open reviewing system that honours both the author and the reviewer, allowing both to engage in professional discussion about the development of individuals' publications.

Living Theories requires rigorous explanations by individuals for their educational influence in their own and others' learning. One form of this rigour is provided through making the processes transparent. As Whitehead (2008) observes, "A living theory methodology explains how the enquiry was carried out in the generation of a living theory" (p. 107). The "processes of validation", that is, the means by which the writer and critics can tell whether the work is consistent with the author's claimed values and practices, must also be included. Whitehead claims the use of a process of "democratic evaluation" demonstrates this consistency. "I submit my explanations of educational influence to a validation group of peers with a request that they help me to strengthen the comprehensibility, truthfulness, rightness and authenticity of the explanation" (Whitehead, 2008, p. 108). It is this kind of feedback to writers that EJOLTS strives to provide.

The responses of my research participants in this chapter demonstrate that this process is largely successful as several reported having their thinking stretched and revisiting what counts as appropriate evidence of their values and practices through the open reviewing process. As McNiff and Whitehead (2011) explain:

> A living theory perspective places the individual practitioner at the heart of their own educational enquiry. Individuals undertake their research with a view to generating their personal living educational theory, which would be an account containing the descriptions and explanations of practice that individuals offer as they address the question, "How do I improve my practice?" (Whitehead, 1989). It is the responsibility of the individual researcher to explain how they hold themselves accountable for their potential influence in the learning of others. (pp. 43–44)

But, and this is particularly pertinent in a book on smart use of digital technologies, EJOLTS encourages multi-media possibilities that enable writers to show how they are enacting the values and practices that they claim in their writing. In this, they are seeking to include a wider range of appropriate forms of evidence to address Whitehead's claim that "the forms of representation that dominate printed text-based media cannot express adequately, in the standards of judgment and explanatory principles of academic texts, the embodied values we use to give meaning and purpose to our lives in education" (Whitehead, 2008, p. 113). I also seek to bring about more equitable research options for people across nations and cultures (see Bruce Ferguson, 2008). Hence YouTube clips, photographs and sound files are embedded in many of the papers submitted to EJOLTS—for example, the link to Whitehead's video added earlier.

Context of study

Why did I decide, in a chapter for a book on digitally smart actions, to investigate EJOLTS' reviewing processes and their impact? I had been interested since my first involvement in EJOLTS in issues such as cross-cultural skills development and the possibilities and challenges inherent in facilitating these in a digital age. Consistent with my claim to be working in a Living Theory way, in January, 2010, I posted this question on the EJOLTS Development Forum:

> During 2008 and 2009, I was requested to provide EJOLTS reviewer feedback for writers from three very different countries. My questions to myself, which I suspect I shall be asking throughout my life, revolve around issues such as: what aspects of my own cultural background (white New Zealander of UK/European background) affect the way I respond to others' practice and writing? How fair and valid does this make my work with them, and my feedback to them? The saying "The goldfish does not see the water" is indicative of my feelings about these issues. How can I best consider my own biases, reflect on these, build on the strengths of what is good, and discard or control what is not helpful when I interact with people from other backgrounds?
>
> There have been times in my educational practice when I have been challenged on my assumptions, behaviour and ways of interacting with colleagues and students. These challenges, while sometimes painful, have been most helpful in confronting me with the 'water' that I hadn't paid attention to before. Those challenges have made me a lot more tentative about previously taken-for-granted aspects of educational and research practice. What I would love to hear discussed on this development team list is how others have worked cross-culturally, how you have been challenged, and what strategies you have developed to build strong positive relationships with those you interact with. I'd warmly welcome your suggestions for improving my own practice!

My query received responses from editors Drs Jack Whitehead (UK) and Branko Bognar (Croatia). The latter wrote:

> *Dear Pip, your question about cross-cultural co-operation is very important particularly for our journal..... Namely, although I am eager that EJOLTS become respectable international journal, I am much more eager that it allows practitioners from different countries (particularly less developed) to present their stories in the way which maybe won't be completely in accordance with all requirements of Western academic community, but which would be genuine, warm and inspirational. (http://ejolts.net/moodle/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=33, 15 August 2009") [reposted 23/10/10]*

Branko confirmed that he was aware of situations faced by authors from non-Western countries in accessing the literature and writing this up in ways that are taken for granted by those writing in English-speaking countries. This short example provides evidence of seeking ways to improve both my own practice and also offering opportunities for people from countries and cultures who may have alternative (but equally important) knowledge to share through publication.

Objectives of study

In January 2012 I gained ethical approval through my own University and from the EJOLTS editorial board to investigate the issue, under the title "Open reviewing in e-journals: Can it build supportive transnational skills and community?" My objectives in this study were to carry out a small but systematic investigation that would provide some answers to the above question for the EJOLTS community but hopefully also in ways that would be helpful to a wider audience. I sought in this way to continue my investigation into whether and how my own and others' ways of being, conducting and reviewing research were perceived as supportive, intrusive or colonising by the recipients of our feedback. I also wished to contribute to the ongoing development of EJOLTS, a journal that I believe occupies a special niche in terms of its transnational, cross-cultural and multi-media emphases. The opportunity to do this work for a book on digital smarts, to share the ongoing research with my colleagues at the University and to gain feedback as it progressed was also valued.

Methodology

Living Theories research is avowedly transparent and representative of the authors' values. Hence, in this research I have sought to be as transparent as possible and to open my practice to disconfirming evidence. The following methodology description, I hope, demonstrates these values. I invited eight people, chosen on the basis of my connection to them in a capacity of being a designated reviewer or that I had contributed ideas to their submitted papers as part of the open review process.[17] They could respond anonymously via Prof. Moira Laidlaw, one of the EJOLTS editors, choosing to participate or not. Four of the eight I approached responded to this invitation, agreeing to participate without anonymity. I had been a designated reviewer for three of these authors and an open reviewer for the fourth.

In EJOLTS, submitters can peruse peer reviewers' bio briefs, and select one by name if they wish. The Editorial Board selects a separate reviewer, bearing the submitter's practice area in mind. The open, transparent reviewing process also enables anybody who is a subscriber to EJOLTS to contribute ideas—a digitally smart way of expanding the feedback to the author. Submitters can therefore receive a variety of very diverse feedback on initial and subsequent drafts of their papers, all of it in plain view. This continue until the paper is either accepted for publication, or withdrawn. Very few choose the latter option.

Once the participants agreed, I emailed them a questionnaire and the results appear below. I am most grateful to Sigrid Gj□tterud from Norway; Sara Salyers from the UK; Jacqueline Delong from Canada (Jackie subsequently); and Hatice Inan from Turkey for their willingness to respond to this research. In response to feedback from an external reviewer, I can acknowledge that two of these authors were relatively new to writing research papers, while the other two are already-published authors. An additional aspect to the research, suggested early on by this book's editors was able to be ethically cleared. This meant I could send the completed questionnaires (unedited and named) to the

[17] One external reviewer suggested that inviting only successful submitters could be seen as biased, and that I should have included others who were not successful. However, there are remarkably few of these, as the journal seeks to support authors through to publication and is highly successful in this endeavour. Additionally, I had no access to the details of the few who withdrew.

EJOLTS editorial panel to support ongoing development of the journal without having to wait for this book to be published. Dr Margaret Farren, representing the editorial panel, replied that they had found the feedback helpful. As a result, they intended to seek additional reviewers; to check the ongoing availability of existing reviewers; to monitor turnaround time more closely; to place word restrictions on paper length so that reviewers are less likely to turn down invitations to review (for example, some papers in the past had been up to 16,000 words); to encourage readers to consider submitting articles of their own, and support others to do likewise; to seek accreditation of the journal in databases that would enable the status to be raised through application to Scopus and Web of Science; and to meet with an online publisher to publish the journal. This feedback to the EJOLTS editors and their response to it, although additional to the research as originally designed, demonstrates the benefits of sharing the work with the Digital Smarts authorial/editorial group as it progressed.

Findings

At the outset, as I have stressed previously, I acknowledge that this is a very small sample and that generalisable claims cannot be made on the basis of our work. However, as I sought to investigate the gap that Zawicki-Richter (2011) identified in research on transnational, cross-cultural work, it both provides some ideas that might provoke wider investigation, and demonstrates that digital publications can be helpful in this regard. Bolding is used below to indicate the main point of each question, rather than appending these to the chapter.

All respondents, regardless of their previous publishing experience, agreed that they would rate their experience of submitting their paper to EJOLTS as 1 = extremely satisfied to 5 = extremely unsatisfied. The number of submissions of successive versions of their paper varied from 2 to 5. There appeared to be no specific identifiable reason for papers to need multiple iterations, with two iterations being cited by both non-English-as-first-language respondents and also the one who cited five iterations. Of the respondents whose first language was English, one submitted two iterations and the other three.

I asked if they had selected a specific reviewer, an option noted earlier, to complement the reviewer assigned by the EJOLTS editors. In this regard, one person selected a reviewer who she knew would understand her field since they had corresponded already (Sara). Another selected a reviewer whose background looked similar. However, this reviewer was tardy in responding, and she felt he didn't really give constructive feedback. The other two did not nominate a specific reviewer, going with the two allocated by the editorial board. No reviewers were from the authors' own countries; one said both were from their part of the world (Hatice) while Sigris indicated that one of her reviewers was from a similar country. For the other two, reviewers were from quite different parts of the world. Readers can see that this is a vastly different process from the 'normal' blind-reviewing that happens for most journals. Submitters to these journals do not know who the reviewers are and cannot engage in dialogue with them. Multiple iterations of an article are often not encouraged by some journals.

Considering that this chapter investigates whether the open reviewing process is an effective way of building transnational, cross-cultural research skills, how helpful did these respondents find their feedback from different reviewers? Sigrid included an excerpt from the feedback she responded to on her first draft (to me as reviewer):

> Thank you for your encouraging feedback—I very much look forward to revising the paper after this! You enlightened the question of what it really is to live with contradiction with one's values. I need to think about that again.

Sigrid said that the article had been written early in her PhD process and the submission of it and feedback from Dr Jack Whitehead, Prof. Moira Laidlaw and me proved to be

> extremely important. I would say this feedback was crucial for my understanding of analysis and it helped me to realize the value of my data in a new way. I was also encouraged to more solidly underpin my points by a more thorough literature review…this was all very useful (crucial) in my further work on my thesis.

Hatice stated that she

> …found e-feedback great because I was reading e-feedbacks on other papers and got some ideas for mine. Also I was happy to see all my reviewers seeing each other's feedback because I believe they were trying to be original and cover things on my paper which is not covered by others. I found the process wonderful.

Hatice highlights a benefit of the open reviewing process—it is not just the 'submitting author' who benefits. A wider community of people who have access to the journal but may never submit their own work can develop research skills by reading successive iterations of an article. Jackie mentioned that feedback "helped to clarify some of my intentions" and "strengthen[ed] the clarity of the writing", while Sara said her feedback from both reviewers had

> forced me to reconsider my emphasis, to look again at what was at the heart of my paper, what was really at stake, and was most important in terms of my own values and passion.

Sara's comment draws attention to the robustness of the journal's attempts to ensure that authors follow the precepts of Living Theories—the reviewer feedback had wanted her to be clear and considered about her own values, and how they were represented in the paper. It is evident in many respondent comments that feedback had pushed submitters to consider how their own living educational theories were developing and whether and how the evidence they had provided justified the claims they were making about their values and their practice. Hence, by adhering to the Living Theories principles of the journal, submitters could continue to work in transnational, cross-cultural ways whilst adhering to the values and passions that motivated their practice in their own contexts. Their investigations required them to be true to themselves. Reviewer comments helped them strengthen the ways that they showed harmony between claimed and demonstrated practice.

I strived to determine whether differing national and cultural lenses had affected reviewer comments, interpretations of the submitted work and how their feedback was received. The diverse backgrounds of the reviewers had not caused misunderstandings, except in the case of Sigrid, whose use of terms such as "student teachers are trained to be resources" was understood differently in Norway than in the UK. She wrote: "In Norwegian the word 'resource' in some settings has a meaning of being resourceful—which might be positive. And I guess the notion of training also have

a slightly different meaning." These clarifying comments were in response to Prof. Moira Laidlaw's questioning of her usage. The value of the open reviewing process is that Sigrid was able to explain the semantic variation, which Moira then accepted.

Hatice felt that, with one exception, all the reviewers had "understood my paper well, maybe because all of us believed in the Living Theory". Both Jackie and Sara felt their work had been fully understood. While no volunteer reviewer comments had been received from authors' own countries, two of the volunteer comments had been from their part of the world. Hatice mentioned these had been "maybe more helpful than I expected", while Sara mentioned comment by Dr Jack Whitehead on a new iteration which had "provided a hugely uplifting validation of the realigned paper".

As Hatice noted, perhaps the shared methodological underpinning of the journal facilitated authors' and reviewers' ability to relate and helped in the building of a community of practice. Hatice stated that "EJOLTS knows what it wants exactly, presents its paradigms clearly which is one of the most current, realistic, practical paradigms". Jackie reinforced this, saying, "Living Theory is the methodology that I use in my research. This journal publishes living theory research". And Sigrid commented that Living Theory had been a major inspiration for her work so EJOLTS "seemed like the best channel for publishing the work". Hatice said that "it did not feel like our different cultural backgrounds made an important difference [as] suggestions were both useful and practical. Mostly reviewers were very clear in their statements and we put a real effort to understand each other." Jackie felt that suggestions were "appropriate and strengthened the paper", while Sara said her reviewer comments were "not only appropriate but essential and transformative. They not only pushed a very different paper into existence but forced me through a real and transformative process myself."

There were various perspectives advanced on the actual process of open review. Some were favourable:

> A completely transparent process which is both more challenging and much, much fairer for submitting researchers (Sara)
>
> I loved working with EJOLTS because of the valuable feedbacks I got (Hatice)
>
> Straightforward (Jackie)
>
> I found it very user-friendly…responses very prompt and forthcoming (Sigrid)

However, sometimes the process didn't work so smoothly. While Hatice complimented the journal because the forum (the online process that holds all the comments, signed and dated) showed when her 'turn' was coming up, she sometimes felt "like the process is very slow. Because of some kind of misunderstanding or not, I lost a lot of time, and my paper was not ready for the following issue". For Sigrid, however, not faced with such delays, "The open review process made the review transparent. There was no long time waiting for a response. It turned out to be learning for life."

Interestingly, when asked why they continued with their paper after reviewer comments on the first iteration, the humanity (my word) of reviewers seems to have been a key factor. "The fact that the reviewers really showed me their reactions and feelings about the paper was an important incentive...I didn't want to 'let them down'…I realized I was given an opportunity for learning I had to take!" (Sigrid). "Reviewers' (volunteer or regular) constructive feedbacks were one of my reasons

to continue work" (Hatice). Jackie commented that "the response from the reviewer was very positive and I felt that the changes were not onerous", while Sara mentioned that "this is not just an experience of doing research and writing it up; it is an experience of challenging yourself as a human being in relationship with other human beings, and as someone whose own values and living contradictions have to be probed and laid open". (This is a particularly illuminating comment, in the light of the diverse national and cultural backgrounds of reviewers and authors.) Sigrid said, "I felt taken care of, I felt my work was treated with respect."

Where a blind-reviewed journal severs potential connections between author and reviewers, EJOLTS positively encourages contact. I wrote to Sigrid early on, saying, "Having re-read my own reviewer comments, and those recently added by [X and Y], I'm thinking you may be feeling fragile about your paper, despite the positive words we have all given you about it." These words were quoted by Sigrid in her questionnaire, saying that she "strongly felt that all responses were given in the best of spirit in order for me to grow…I had a positive hope I knew where to go on the base of the feedback". Jackie commented that she "appreciated the engaged response from the reviewer". Sara mentioned the synchronicity between EJOLTS' aims and its process, stating that

> EJOLTS presents a quite remarkable opportunity to contextualize reflection and inquiry in terms of living relationships. I am still deeply moved and inspired by the fact that love can be present and visible in an academic journal and between academics who know one another only as online colleagues.

This comment is, to me, evidence that digital technologies can help to build a real community of practice, even when the participants have never met, do not belong to similar institutions or countries, and are very diverse.

Feelings were not always positive, however. Sigrid commented on feelings of "dispiritedness" after receiving an editor's review, but recast this as "a great opportunity to learn how to become a researcher". Hatice had one reviewer who "criticized my paper but did not make any suggestion for improvement and sounded like he did not really understand my work". Sara, after feedback on her initial draft, experienced "frustration, depression that I would have to go through my process again, and the feeling that I could not see the wood for the trees". However, progress came from this. "This was followed by elation when, after a long incubation period, the light suddenly went on and I realised that I had lost sight of the whole reason for writing the paper and of all that mattered most to me."

So, did the authors feel that they had built skills as a result of participating in this open reviewing process with feedback from such diverse locations? The responses here were uniformly positive. Jackie, who is also a member of the editorial board for EJOLTS, expressed hope that she "was contributing to an emerging critical mass and encouraging others to do the same", and that the clarity of her writing had improved as a result of the process. Hatice, an experienced researcher already, said her research skills had not changed, "but as a writer I felt improvement…Reviewers found the limited parts and helped me to make my paper more clear to other people [and] increased my enthusiasm on my research. I was more eager to tell people my story." Sigrid's comments on the skills she had learned have already been mentioned above, but noted that the feedback had "pointed to the fact that the participants' voices were not as audible as intended". Probed about whether she would recommend to other writers to submit a paper to EJOLTS, Sigrid said, "I felt the reviewers to

encounter me in I-Thou (Buber) relationships although we had never physically met. This was very encouraging and made me handle the critique in a very positive way. Since my article was about love and critique in supervision, this experience also gave valuable data to my research!" All respondents said they would recommend this journal's review process to others. Hatice has positively encouraged one of her email lists and qualitative researcher colleagues to submit to EJOLTS. Jackie, as might be expected of an editor for the journal, recommends it to her students "not only as a means to get feedback on their writing but also to share their knowledge and build that knowledge base". Sara's comments on the benefits of self-probing as a living contradiction support this view.

Discussion

I wanted to foreground the voices of my respondents in this chapter, as their perspectives are what count in any claims I might make about the benefits of EJOLTS' open peer reviewing process in building transnational, cross-cultural researching and writing skills while developing a virtual community. I think readers can see from their comments that while there were some glitches (such as delays in processing drafts in one case; getting useful feedback from one reviewer; feelings of anxiety about their work), they are overwhelmingly positive about participating in this open reviewing process. Their responses indicate a clear sense that Living Theories methodologies and the EJOLTS journal have provided a communal space for conversation.

The feedback on what skills they have acquired, however, is more diverse. All seem to have found reviewer comments (whether to them personally or through viewing the feedback provided to others) benefited their writing. But with two of the four already experienced researchers, there were really only two who felt that their research skills had been further developed through the process. These two, however, were extremely positive about the effects that the review process had on their claims to knowledge, on their ability to express their values and beliefs, that the process had been "transformative" and was about "learning for life". Three of the four commented on the transparency of the process, and how it had enabled them to follow the progress of their paper through the reviewing process, or helped them to learn from feedback provided to others, or how the engaged responses of reviewers had encouraged them to continue even when feeling "dispirited" or "unable to see the wood for the trees".

It is interesting that none of them felt that the contributions from reviewers from different cultures, countries and parts of the world had adversely affected them. In fact, comments show almost uniformly that there was a sense of being understood and supported, regardless of where the reviewers were from (excepting the reviewer whom Hatice felt had not understood her work, not made suggestions for improvement and was tardy in responding—the sole criticism of a reviewer in this study). The only specific comment about misunderstanding was that between Moira and Sigrid, and Moira's was a question of clarification that Sigrid, because of the open reviewing process, was able to respond to and explain. No respondents felt that their own situations had not been well understood by their reviewers (apart from Hatice's one reviewer). In a digital world, it is encouraging that feedback can be sought, given, received and acted on in the ways that this chapter shows can happen.

Even though this is a very small group and this is a short-term study, the evidence suggests that transnational, cross-cultural communication can occur; it can help to build or extend skills, and as one

respondent indicated, this can actually happen in ways that are perceived as "loving". As Siemens (2004) wrote, "We derive our competence from forming connections...the capacity to form connections between sources of information, and thereby create useful information patterns, is required to learn in our knowledge economy" (An Alternative Theory section, para. 1, 4). EJOLTS has enabled both experienced and new researchers to form connections across countries and continents. The data presented here, although with the recognition that the group is very small, have shown how authors and their reviewers have reached across national and cultural boundaries to help each other to grow; to see where and how to better access information and support when conducting research; to challenge perspectives and to articulate better the work that we are all undertaking. Siemens continued: "Nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning" (Connectivism section, para. 3). My contention would be that the nurturing and connecting that is evident through EJOLTS and attested to by my respondents is supportive of this learning.

This raises questions as to why 'high status' research journals adhere to blind-reviewed methods as the 'gold standard'. I have encountered beginning researchers who have been crushed and humiliated by being on the receiving end of anonymous reviewer comments. The new researchers have little opportunity to explain or clarify their work to an anonymous reviewer. These beginning researchers have decided that they and their work are worthless in the face of such anonymous clobbering.

Connectivism instead suggests "a model of learning that acknowledges the tectonic shifts in society where learning is no longer an internal, individualistic activity [and that it] provides insight into learning skills and tasks needed for learners to flourish in a digital era" (Siemens, 2004, Conclusion, para. 2). As a Living Theory researcher who seeks to encourage equity in publishing transnationally and cross-culturally, I have already questioned, and need to continue to question, any such 'one size fits all' publishing requirements. Digitally supported communities are one way of sharing this work that allows us to grow digitally smarter as researchers and writers.

Conclusion

This small study has indicated that the building of research skills and communities via digital publication is possible and helpful. To determine how effective it is in building transnational and cross-cultural research skills more generally will take a much larger study over a longer period of time, but this chapter raises the issues and encourages further exploration. I claim, with support from my participants, that open reviewing is an appropriate and helpful tool in the building of healthy global research communities. However it flies in the face of mainstream current publishing practice. If the aim of research publications is to be exclusive, to appeal to small elites whose work is 'A-rated', then blind reviewing makes some sense. But it is hardly designed to build community nor to foster, in a digital age, a new generation of researchers whose ways of expressing themselves may be quite different but equally valuable.

Hence EJOLTS' avowed commitment is to open and transparent reviewing, allowing the inclusion of YouTube clips, audio recording, photographs and other ways of presenting knowledge, alongside ensuring that authors can express themselves clearly with validity and are able to debate their perspectives robustly along the way. As Dadds and Hart (2001) said, "If our aim is to create conditions that facilitate methodological inventiveness, we need to ensure as far as possible that our

pedagogical approaches match the message that we seek to communicate" (p. 169). EJOLTS "was established in 2008 to meet the challenge of publishing international and refereed multimedia explanations of the educational influences in the learning of practitioner-researchers". That it has done so effectively, in ways that have left authors feeling valued and supported, indicates that it has achieved the pedagogical match of message with approach. It is a great example of 'digitally smart' ways of supporting research skills development transnationally and cross-culturally.

I want to finish this paper with Sara's words in response to a question about why she submitted to EJOLTS rather than some other journal. This response mounts a strong challenge to some of the more traditional journals or ways of presenting new knowledge—a challenge that I believe is timely in an increasingly 'publish or perish' tertiary environment.

> There were several equally important reasons [for submitting to EJOLTS]. First, the journal is a unique forum for those who are working within—and to develop—a living theory approach to their own reflective research and practice. It not only allows but expects the kinds of data, such as embodied knowledge, that is essential to the growth of human knowledge and yet is discounted by more traditional publications. Second, its online format and the open review process make submission, editing and publication a completely transparent process which is both more challenging and much, much fairer for submitting researchers. Finally, it allows the submission of work in ordinary, simple English instead of the deadly jargon that is so much part of academic writing. This 'academese'—like the Emperor's new clothes— possesses such a mystique that its patent absurdity, its obstruction of the very communication it exists to serve are no longer recognized. In summary, EJOLTS challenges what is considered valuable research, how it is evaluated and the form it is presented in, in ways that are powerful and extremely necessary.

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