

## *ENQUIRE* – a (self-)reflexive journey

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the more obvious processes related to establishing a postgraduate journal and more basic, general questions about the research process, the academic community, being a researcher, and in particular the place of postgraduates in academia. These various aspects will demonstrate the relevance and opportunities the journal *Electronic Nottingham Quarterly for Ideas, Research, and Evaluation (ENQUIRE)* can provide, not only for postgraduates but also for the academic world in general. *ENQUIRE* hopes to serve as a base for more reflective, interactive and engaged social sciences, and we are convinced that postgraduate researchers can be highly influential in this process.

**Keywords** *ENQUIRE*; postgraduate journal; reflexivity; academic relations

### **INTRODUCTION**

When we were first asked to write an article for *European Political Science*, we were delighted that there might be a wider academic interest in the creation of our postgraduate journal. Following our initial excitement came the difficult process of actually writing the piece. We had to decide on the aims of the article – What was it we wanted to say in this piece? What would be useful for other postgraduates but also the wider academic community? We felt we did not

want to produce a 'how-to' guide for other postgraduates wanting to set up their own journals (although we do think there is more space for this kind of endeavour); nor did we want to over-analyse the academic writing and publishing processes. Rather, we opted to use our own experiences in setting up and running a postgraduate journal in order to highlight some critical issues that relate to academic knowledge production and dissemination.

The piece develops as a personal narrative in order to move away from

the prescriptive genre of 'writing academically' (c.f. Murray, 2005) – we want to develop an article using our own case study to demonstrate the role that postgraduates can play in the wider academic context. More precisely, we think that this example of the development of *Electronic Nottingham Quarterly for Ideas, Research, and Evaluation (ENQUIRE)* illustrates the ways in which postgraduates and early career researchers are a crucial component of academia and yet are also marginalised within academic circles. This contradiction is not only at the heart of this article, but was also one of the driving motivations for establishing *ENQUIRE*. As such, we have opted to discuss and to reflect on our journey of establishing the journal to demonstrate the way this contradiction is played out.

In order to do this, the article will first address the processes and practicalities related to establishing a postgraduate journal: this is fundamental in understanding how the reflexive process is an important aspect of the journal's identity. Secondly, we will discuss how reflexivity as a component of *ENQUIRE* has actually emerged from our own reflections as the initiators of the journal, but also from our experience of conducting rather solitary research projects. This relates to the third section which addresses people's experience of academia as abstraction: we want to show how *ENQUIRE* 'brings people in' by re-personalising academic research and writing. In the fourth section, we focus on the issue of marginalisation: as postgraduates we are enmeshed in a system of power relations, evident within the 'academic community', which we feel needs to be addressed. Fifthly and finally, we describe how the sometimes problematic nature of the postgraduate experience discussed here has led to the establishment of (self-)reflection as a hallmark of *ENQUIRE*. It is clear that there is a need for reflection on academic processes, but more than that there is the need for

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reflection on our own research processes, our own positions, and our own practices.

## **ESTABLISHING THE JOURNAL**

In order to discuss the development of the journal and the path we took towards a more reflexive approach, we must first outline how *ENQUIRE* initially came to be, and highlight the practical issues that establishing a postgraduate journal posed.

*ENQUIRE* was initially conceived by the three authors of this article, Magali Peyrefitte, Erin Sanders and Bernhard Weicht. Although there are a number of journals that are aimed at disseminating the work of postgraduate students,<sup>1</sup> most of these journals are generally aimed at arts, humanities, and social science researchers collectively. There were no existing journals that focused solely on research findings generated in the social sciences. Even publications that result from postgraduate conferences, which are becoming more and more popular, often do not offer the opportunity to publish articles in standardised, peer-reviewed journals. We felt that there was more space in the market for high-quality journals aimed specifically at social-science postgraduates and early-career academics. We were also eager to help build the skills and the confidence levels of the students in our own postgraduate community at the University of Nottingham School of Sociology and Social Policy

by being engaged in the continuous process of publishing an academic journal.

We realised that we would require the support of the School in order to make the journal successful, and our first step was to contact our postgraduate convenor about the feasibility of launching a journal within Sociology and Social Policy. Dr Nick Stevenson worked with us to help 'sell' the journal to the School, and we were fortunate that our department encouraged our idea. After gaining approval from the School, we applied to an internal organisation at the University of Nottingham, the Centre for Integrative Learning (CIL), to help fund the project. We were able to obtain 2 years of funding from the CIL as well as some supplementary funding from the School<sup>2</sup> which provided us with the monetary backing we needed to start *ENQUIRE*. We felt funding was necessary for a variety of reasons, but two of our key objectives were to create a training programme for postgraduates and also to host a conference that would run in conjunction with the journal.

With the funding we were able to organise a training session with Book House Publishing, who provided us with a day of intensive training around copy-editing and proof-reading. The documentation they provided us with has helped to form the basis of a training session that we now run in-house for new postgraduate students. We felt that providing good-quality training was an important way of helping to build skills and confidence levels within the postgraduate community.

The training also highlighted some key legal and ethical issues that we needed to address. An essential issue that we had to manage was the status of the journal, specifically, whether we were going to make it 'official' in the sense that we would assign an ISSN number to the publication – or whether it would be better to let the journal be published online in a more informal capacity. We arranged

a number of meetings with legal staff at the University, and then we worked through the issue as a team. Ultimately, it was decided that for a number of reasons organising the journal in a more official fashion was the best option, and as such *ENQUIRE* has an ISSN number and is legitimately recognised by the British Library as a formal publication.

The training also meant that we developed a systematic approach to editing and this helped us to establish our house-style guidelines. It also helped clarify the need to have a functioning organisational structure that secures the continuity of the journal. Of course, having clear guidelines and procedures also ensures that decision-making processes are consistent and all publications are dealt with in the same manner.

We have also adapted the structure of the journal to ensure that we create an environment where cooperation between student members is a core feature of the process. We took the decision to have, for each edition of the journal, two editors who work together to decide on a theme for their issue. This has two advantages: firstly, it means that editors can draw on their own areas of expertise; and secondly, it means that many different people have the opportunity to be editors and learn firsthand how the editorial/publishing process works. One challenge this brings is that editors are only in charge of one issue; as such editors are always 'new to the job': the learning process begins again with each edition. In order to retain the skills that editors have acquired, we ask them to become permanent members of the editorial board.

The function of the editorial board has shifted over the past year to be more prominent in the decision-making process. We have moved from an editorial board where the roles of members were relatively unspecified – six student members had volunteered but their roles were never clearly defined, as we weren't

entirely clear how the board should function. The experience of producing the first issue gave us an insight into the significance of a functioning and well-defined editorial board and led us to revise its composition. The editorial board, now comprised of former editors rather than volunteers, works together with the current editors to make decisions about the publication of articles and generally provides support and advice throughout the editing process.

Working within this supportive structure, the role of the editors for each issue is to jointly generate the issue's theme, read the submitted articles and send *all* of the articles to carefully selected peer reviewers. We have over 100 peer reviewers who were recruited following an extensive 'call for reviewers'. Our database is composed of both student and academic referees who reflect a wide range of expertise within the social sciences. One of the main selling points of *ENQUIRE* is that all submissions undergo a rigorous double-blind peer review process. All authors get detailed feedback on their articles, even if they are ultimately not accepted for publication.

After peer review comments are submitted, editors present their recommendations (along with the recommendations of two peer reviewers) to the editorial board. We then collectively discuss each article and come to a final decision about whether the article is publishable. This collaborative process ensures that new editors are supported in what can be quite an onerous endeavour, and also makes certain that we work as a team to get each edition published.

In the space of the past 2 years, we have not only had the time to get to grips with the actual day-to-day tasks associated with running *ENQUIRE*, but recently we have thought and reflected more about the wider impact of a postgraduate journal, and what this

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says about the postgraduate/academic experience more generally. Not only has this led to an increasing academic and thematic focus on (self-)reflection, but we were actually able to find our space and to position the journal in a broader academic context. These ruminations will be the basis of the following sections of the article, as we try to address some of the fundamental steps in the process of the journey towards creating a reflective postgraduate journal.

## **THE ROAD TO REFLEXIVITY**

As our original aim in producing the journal was to publish (postgraduate) academic writing and to make our (postgraduate) contributions visible to the academic community, we realised that we needed to find our place in the world of academic journals. Indeed, we envisage *ENQUIRE* as an option, an opportunity – *not* as a substitute for other more established journals. How then was *ENQUIRE* different to the 'proper' academic journals already out there, and what could we offer that would make people not only want to publish, but also to read the journal? *ENQUIRE* has had to find a place of its own in providing a dynamic and unique forum dedicated to the sharing of ideas and knowledge.

While publishing the first issue of *ENQUIRE* on 'Methodologies and Methods',

we understood that critical engagement with one's own research is something that is missing in the wider sphere of publications. There is very little space for academics, let alone postgraduate researchers, to apply a reflexive and self-critical approach to their work, their own position, and the research process.

The *ENQUIRE* conference was originally intended to bring postgraduates together to share their research and experiences; however during the course of the conference it was clear that there was a widespread desire to be more reflexive about the nature of the research process and about *being* a researcher. A sign of this desire was demonstrated during the workshop sessions that offered reflections on postgraduate relationships to teaching, publishing, researching, and career development. These types of workshops are not overly common, and were generally well attended and very well received by the postgraduate attendees at the conference. *ENQUIRE* is now addressing these concerns by publishing work that engages with issues of reflexivity according to our formulated themes. Realising the need to create a distinctive identity and find a niche in the market (Loft *et al*, 2002), reflexivity as a framework allows us to compete with other academic publications.

The aim in creating *ENQUIRE* was more than just to address a gap in the market. In our opinion the process of academic working, doing research, and writing cannot and should not be reduced to a self-focused, self-reliant exercise. During the first year that the journal was fully functional, the three of us (the founding members of the journal) were in the middle of carrying out our fieldwork. Erin was investigating the sex industry in Thailand, Bernhard was looking at conceptualisations of care work, and Magali was exploring aspects of South Asian suburbanisation in Nottingham. While our projects were very different, they

were all very demanding and challenging for us. We felt that part of the problem was that conducting fieldwork had become very self-focused and self-reliant – we did not share our stories with other members of the academic community; we did not even share our research experiences with each other. There was no real dialogue or debate about the difficulties involved in doing research and, eventually, being a researcher. Although we had our research diaries and were encouraged to be reflexive about our research experiences, we felt this was meaningless if we were not able to engage in a dialogue with other postgraduates about this.

We felt, and still feel now that intellectual engagement only becomes alive and meaningful through dialogue and interaction with the academic world in particular and broader society in general. Research becomes meaningful when the researcher enters and engages with his/her outside world. Current publications, whether academic journals or books, offer limited space to the process of everyday reflexivity that we engage in during our research. In general, these processes remain very personal and private experiences. *ENQUIRE*, on the other hand provides a platform according a unique salience to these everyday matters of reflexivity and self-reflexivity.

## **BRINGING PEOPLE IN**

With the journal we want to provide a space for real dialogical engagement. We want to take the aspects of the Ph.D. that are so often not spoken about, and are unexplored, and bring them into the open: we want to make the invisible visible (see Brighenti (2007) for a discussion of the necessity to introduce visibility as a main category into the social sciences). The journal and the conference have created figurative spaces for this interaction to happen.

The *ENQUIRE* conference in particular provides a more literal and tangible space for postgraduates to meet and to connect with one another. The intensive interaction with authors of articles and prospective delegates to our 2008 conference was highly appreciated by everyone. Over sixty delegates, coming from universities in countries such as India, South Africa, Australia, and the United States, and from various universities in the United Kingdom, are a clear sign that an event like this, organised by and for postgraduate students and early career researchers, is highly demanded. We had four well-established academics deliver keynote papers at the conference, and we were delighted by their enthusiasm about taking part. The conference provided a concrete way of being present in the academic world, of sharing experiences, and it again highlighted the importance of recognising oneself in the research process. The dialogue or dialectical 'exchange' was enriched by the interdisciplinary nature of the conference and the diversity in people's experience of their research. It concretised the idea of *ENQUIRE* as a place and space of multi-layered and plural interactions. And as completed feedback forms have shown, the delegates were particularly positive about the possibility of presenting their work in an extremely supportive, constructive and encouraging environment.

This constant emphasis on reflexivity is also demonstrated in the way we engage with our peer reviewers. While many of our peer reviewers are established academics, many are reviewing for the first time. Our aim is to provide all contributors with feedback. This means that we also provide comments to reviewers about the quality of their referee reports and inform them about the outcome of editorial-board decisions. This would be one more step towards re-personalising the process of writing and publishing in academia.

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As a result, *ENQUIRE* sees the necessary dialogue and exchange between researchers as constitutive as well as constructive of its identity. The journal's existence is the organic result of constantly reflective contributions from a vibrant and diverse community of postgraduates and early career researchers. By making (self-)reflexivity the main focus, *ENQUIRE* highlights the close correlation between high quality research production and a thoughtful and self-critical engagement with one's own research. At the same time, the originality of the work engendered through a reflexive and self-reflexive approach enhances the quality of people's research and academia in general.

### **BEING INVOLVED WITH 'THE OUTSIDE WORLD'**

For postgraduates and early-career researchers alike taking this step towards a real self-reflexive engagement means recognising one's own position in the academic environment. In other words, active and conscious interaction with the outside world is not only desirable but also crucial for any understanding of intellectual theorising and researching. Recognising one's position also means recognising the ways the research

process is constituted by power relations and potential marginalisation.

In the social sciences, we often talk about power: we recognise differentials of power in our work and try to correct for these gaps in our research practices. That said, the power differential between us as Ph.D. students and more established academics remains opaque: it is certainly there but it is not often acknowledged, and rarely problematised. As postgraduate students we feel this gap – and in many ways founding the journal has gone some way to help bringing these power issues into the open. We recognise that we are not yet academic staff, that in some respects we are still students: we are at the intersection of two worlds. Realising that there is a power difference and bringing this into the open acknowledges the silence that exists around this issue. Finding one's own space and place within a broader and often abstract community (here, the academic world) cannot be done independently, but is explicitly defined by relationships with others and discursive negotiation in interactive processes.

Trying to address our position within these power relations, we have felt a desire to re-personalise the outside academic world. Especially at the beginning of an academic career, when a researcher is finding her/his space in the academic community, the 'outside world' is often perceived as an unknown and un-graspable mass of established academics. With *ENQUIRE* we want to bridge the gap and tear down the borders and boundaries between the postgraduate student/early career researcher and the broader academic community. By providing an encouraging space, the journal helps to bring the outside closer to the researcher so that the broader academic world is not perceived as a threat or challenge anymore. Rather, postgraduates and early career researchers come to recognise their own position, role, and

identity in the academic and research sphere.

By relating to the outside world we recognise three aspects as being crucial in relation to reflexivity. Our research is an everyday engagement *vis-à-vis* the outside world, and situating or re-situating ourselves within it is an essential exercise and determinant asset of the research process (*positioning ourselves*). Our identity as social scientists more broadly speaking is an everyday engagement of a critical nature with society. We should be reflective of the daily particularities of being and seeing the world. These particularities deserve a space of representation in order thereby to translate the lived experiences of being a social scientist. The epistemological and methodological nature of our work is also constitutive and constructive of the reflexivity and self-reflexivity of others.

Through this process of making these invisible power relations visible, we understand the journal as a concrete way of addressing these issues. The invaluable insight into the process of editing and publishing has offered knowledge and skills in a process that can initially appear impenetrable and mysterious. Understanding the intricacies as well as the requirements of academic editing and writing has allowed us to feel more involved in academic life. Furthermore, understanding and experiencing what happens 'backstage' (Goffman, 1969) has had and will continue to have a positive impact on the way we approach the publication of our own work in peer-reviewed journals.

## **(SELF-)REFLECTION AS A THEME**

The relevance and importance of the conscious self-reflection of postgraduate students, as authors, reviewers, or audience is further emphasised by the strategic direction *ENQUIRE* aims to take. The

themes of our issues, as formulated in the calls for papers, include an acknowledgment of these aspects. This was partially realised with our inaugural issue on 'Methodologies and Methods' in which authors reflected on their research, the subjective nature of conducting research, and also partly achieved with the *ENQUIRE* conference. In addition, our own position within the academic world convinced us to make reflexivity a permanent feature of the *ENQUIRE* project.

The original idea for the journal was to have themed issues and the choice of the themes is inscribed in our continuous reflection on the nature of the journal and our effort to further determine its place in the academic debate. Opting for themed issues permits a critical engagement with a particular topic while adopting the perspective of reflexivity.

The first issue was reflective of these ideas with a wide range of articles on methodologies and started to show how reflexive and self-reflexive writing could fit into the broader aims of *ENQUIRE*. To exemplify this evolution, the call for papers for the third issue, focusing on 'Narrating women's experiences', explicitly includes an invitation to authors:

*... to reflect on the nature of the research process and to stimulate debate and discussion on how narrative practices have been used by researchers to explore these understandings. We ask authors to explore the bounded nature of the research process, and provide illuminations from their own experiences of using narrative research techniques, or listening to research participants' narratives.*

While the fourth call for papers asks potential authors to

*explore the place of the social science researcher within the practice of health and illness research. Self-reflection and*

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*rumination upon the role and experiences of the researcher within the research is the aim. We are keen to explore the challenges posed in a field where differences in health status (or indeed similarities) are the focus of investigation. We encourage authors to discuss their research experiences and debate whether these experiences feed into an increased understanding of the research realm.*

Whatever the theme of the issue, be it women's narratives or health research, *ENQUIRE* now strives to engage with the aspects of self-reflection. Several authors have suggested that they appreciate this focus on reflexivity as it allows them to explore otherwise invisible aspects of their work.

Postgraduate journals inevitably have to define for themselves whether they want to be reader or writer oriented (Taylor, 2005). The journal is not only a space where postgraduates can publish their work; but it is also a source of knowledge where readers can find unexplored ideas. We feel that by developing such a niche we are clearly demarcated from other academic publications; we are able to compete with more established journals because our move towards reflexivity creates a space whereby readers are induced to explore reflective articles that might not appear in more mainstream publications.

We hope that this ongoing focus on self-reflection and reflexivity will bridge the gap between the researcher and her/his

outside world and make it easier for postgraduate students particularly to position themselves in the realm of academic writing and research. This is also based on our conviction that a focus and an emphasis on self-reflexivity and a reflective research process not only adds another perspective on the research but actually improves the overall quality of the work. This rather unusual, unexplored approach enables a new positioning of our common research agenda, driven as it is by our awareness that an element of reflexivity is crucial to the quality of any research and writing. We therefore think that *ENQUIRE* can serve as a journal in which postgraduates are at the forefront of a reflexive approach to research, the academic community, and the production and evaluation of knowledge relevant to all academic endeavours.

## **ENQUIRE AS A POSTGRADUATE JOURNAL**

In summary, it can be said that the establishment of *ENQUIRE* can and should be understood as an ongoing journey. This journey has not only brought about invaluable insights into the functioning of an academic journal, the business of editing and publishing articles, and the process of submission to a journal; rather, being involved in the *ENQUIRE* project has allowed us, and partly even forced us, to rethink many

invisible or taken-for-granted aspects of the academic world and the academic community. We discovered a need to reflect on our own position as social scientists, on the process of 'doing' and 'living' social science.

This journey has not only enabled us to position our journal within 'the market', by finding our academic niche, but it has also created the space for a postgraduate avant-garde in the realm of social sciences. Les Back (2002) describes the Ph.D. as a process or a journey into scholarship, identifying the first step in 'examin[ing] the relationship between thinking, listening, writing and time' (2.4). In this article, we have argued that this process of (self-)reflection is not finished with one's Ph.D., but forms an integral part of any academic involvement. *ENQUIRE* is a way in which this journey can manifest itself. We hope that *ENQUIRE* will serve as a base for more reflective, interactive, and engaged social sciences and we are convinced that postgraduate researchers can be highly influential in this process. Our reasons for founding *ENQUIRE* have therefore been partly transformed as the journal has progressed; we have arrived at a place where we feel that creating a space for postgraduates not only refers to getting into the traditional academic world, but also entails a desire to question, challenge and ultimately enrich *that very world*.

### **Notes**

- 1 See, for example, E-sharp at the University of Glasgow and QUEST at the Queen's University Belfast.
- 2 The *ENQUIRE* journal received £10,000 from the University of Nottingham's CIL, as well as financial support and encouragement from the University of Nottingham School of Sociology and Social Policy.

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