Reflections on Joining the SURJ Team

Philip K. Cox

When I applied to the Surrey University Research Journal (SURJ) to become part of the editorial team, I had not expected to find myself writing about my experiences. Here, my aim is to reflect on joining the team and to pass on what I have gained. This is far more than I could have anticipated and so could benefit other students. For some background, my lecturers had expressed concerns about my writing style. They suggested I visit the Researcher Development team based in Surrey Library to seek educational support. The support I needed was both professional and personal. Professionally, I needed guidance regarding how to structure my work. Personally, I needed the confidence to write to an academic standard.

The application process to join SURJ began with an email seeking copy-editors, layout editors and proofreaders. I thought I could manage the layout or proofreading roles and quietly learn about academic writing from within the Journal team. The recruitment process involved writing a 500-word piece on a title provided by the selection team, and then an exercise around editing and proof-reading. There was also a brief informal discussion. To my surprise and absolute delight, I was offered the opportunity to join the SURJ editorial team. The welcome workshop was both informal and informative. Here, we formed a mixed group of postgraduate researchers from diverse backgrounds. By the time the workshop finished, I had already grown in confidence and ability.

It was exciting to receive the first paper to copy-edit, which brings us to the heart of my reflections. By editing the work of others, I have become more attuned to editing my own work. Through the process of applying the workshop training and ongoing support, I now see the strengths and weaknesses of my own work. This feeds back into the editing process and creates a virtuous cycle: the more I give, the more I get back. There is a proven reality to this philosophy. Since joining the team my lecturers’ feedback has improved to a level where it is now a pleasure rather than a stressful chore to submit work. The Journal experience has also shaped my awareness of the readers’ needs in that I am learning how to convey my ideas with greater clarity, and to specific audiences.
Engagement with my reflections on joining the SURJ team has also shaped awareness of my own needs. It had not occurred to me that being part of SURJ offers a pathway to other experiences, and the path is leading to an ‘action plan’. The outline of the plan is simple. Within our team of postgraduate researchers and editorial staff, I noticed how each of us writes in a different way. Some of us write using a scientific objective method, some using a more socio-humanistic subjective approach, and for some their style is somewhere in-between. Beyond the team, I also noticed how the writers I admire write across academic disciplines and for non-academic audiences. Some write short stories or poems, and I feel they express more of themselves in their personal ‘labour of love’. So my straightforward plan is this: I have enrolled on a creative writing course.

In addition to this, my plan also suggests some steps to move towards broadening my professional skills. I became a reviewer for a key journal in my chosen discipline. Additionally, I have two publications forthcoming. Beyond writing, the conference presentations of my research are now more succinct and skilfully delivered. My point is not to self-congratulate; it is to say that the benefits of working with SURJ during my time at Surrey have helped to expand my academic development.

As I look forward to graduation and having more space to put my plan into practice, I can see some areas of my professional and personal life that can be further developed. The key Journal in my chosen discipline is seeking assistant editors. Whether we believe in chance, fate or synchronicity, the networking process curiously keeps placing me in the right place at the right time, or perhaps I am leaning to see new opportunities. While this reflective piece was going through the editorial process, following on from a link made with the co-author of a forthcoming publication, I was invited to present my own research at a conference dedicated to my research topic. I recently designed and delivered it in the form of a workshop. My point is that these developments began with a simple response to SURJ, which gave me confidence to accept offers to collaborate on projects. Being part of SURJ gave me this self-belief.

As I gain more professional confidence, the process of personal development also seems to be taking on a life of its own. The experiences with SURJ have shaped how I feel about myself and what I secretly dream of. That is to say, each area where I have grown still leaves room for further development; I am far from the finished product. For instance, I have started writing a short story and while sharing it with a child in our family, I was told off for being too ‘dry’. For my 10-year-old relative, I think this translates as, ‘Umm, yes, you’ve been at university for a while now and learnt a nice academic style - what about creativity and fun’? It is interesting that it takes a child to remind me that it is OK to develop writing skills and enjoy the experience.
So what is the take-home message of these reflections on joining the SURJ team? I am wondering if other postgraduate researchers know what is on offer, because no one from my training cohort even read the initial email seeking to recruit for SURJ. The experience of being part of an editorial team has opened my eyes to the benefits of giving and receiving knowledge, and it feels good. Professionally, I can now structure my work. Personally, I feel more confident in writing and am expanding beyond academia. Doors to pleasurable activities post-university are opening. So as we end, being part of SURJ is definitely worth your consideration. Also, it is lovely telling my Mum what I am doing and seeing her joy at how my life has developed since simply responding to an email from SURJ.

Philip Cox: School of Psychology, Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Surrey.
Email: p.cox@surrey.ac.uk

Copyright © 2016 Philip Cox; licensee SURJ. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial ShareAlike 4.0 International Licence.

ISSN: 2058-5551 (Online)